Graphic Styles Through History

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Similar to fine arts, graphic design styles through history can be classified in movements. Each defined style has its own set of characteristics, from illustration and typographical techniques, to organizational approaches and design goals. Trends gradually moved from the organic, detailed illustrations of Art Nouveau to the stark, rudimentary style of De Stijl, and then to a mix of practicality and unconventional in Post Modern design. These graphic styles are a reflection of art, culture, and society during their respective time periods. I selected five styles (Art Nouveau, De Stijl, Art Deco, Swiss International, and Post Modern) and researched the design characteristics for each. I then created my own posters — one for each style — using those techniques and recorded my design process.
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Over time, graphic designers develop a personal style while practicing their craft. My personal style can be summed up in one phrase: white space is your friend. I use simplicity as a mindset and natural space as a frame. I prefer to let images — whether photographs or illustrations — be the dominant element of a design. I use white space as a natural divide, instead of cluttering a layout with boxes and excess lines. It is a style I execute well and over many mediums. However, doing the same thing every time grows monotonous and leaves my creative side wanting more of a challenge. There is a rich history of design at my fingertips, full of bright, bold color palettes and abstract shapes. The problem is my own inhibitions. I am afraid to try new approaches for fear of failure. For this creative project, I researched and practiced new design styles to apply to my work.

Choosing five graphic styles throughout history, I researched the design characteristics and historical context of each: Art Nouveau, De Stijl, Art Deco, Swiss International, and Post Modern. After looking at and studying these graphic styles for inspiration, I began to create original print posters. The posters I created are executions of those design styles. I provide a brief overview of the history and design style characteristics for each. This statement contains those details and my process for creating each poster.

**ART NOUVEAU**

Beginning in the late 1880s in England, Art Nouveau was a style caught between ornamentation and practicality. Design was organic, drawing much inspiration and direction from nature (Heller & Chwast, 1994). There were also influences of Japanese woodblock prints and Impressionist painters, like the swirling style of Vincent Van Gogh. This Art Nouveau illustration style was comprised of simple, black strokes and fill colors from a neutral, earthy
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palette. The typography was hand-drawn with the same organic feel, and designs often portrayed figures of idealized women (*Art Nouveau*, n.d.).

To find inspiration for my Art Nouveau poster, I started by looking mostly at the work of Alphonse Mucha, who played a large role in defining the style. His work, featuring idealized women with intricate hair patterns, was labeled “le style Mucha,” and at times just “l’art nouveau” (*Art Nouveau*, n.d.). For the first draft, I attempted to execute the hand-drawn effect with computer-generated approaches. I have had a limited background in fine arts, and never thought myself capable of freehand drawing. Instead, I tried to use a computer-generated illustration style that mimicked thin pencil strokes. From Figure 1, a poster by Mucha, I took the idea of a border to frame the design. To bring in nature, I originally made it a leafy design blocked in by rectangles, which overlapped at corners to create the border. Then I took separate elements of nature — rock and flowers — and an image of a woman reminiscent of Mucha’s style, and traced them with the pencil tool in Adobe Illustrator. The result was not organic in the least, but rigid and amateur. It was more Classical in its style than Art Nouveau.

![Figure 1: Poster, Alphonse Mucha (France 1896)](image-url)
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After a few more failed attempts at creating the style with a computer screen as my paper and mouse as my pencil, I succumbed to the true nature of the graphic style: freehand drawing. I also sought out new inspiration to help me frame my design, but in a way that was not Classical in style. Figure 2 inspired me to use blank space for my text and work it into my framing. I was also influenced by the wrought iron and winding nature of Art Nouveau landscapes. With a bit of patience and the right mindset, I was able to produce decent sketches. I had to think of pieces of the drawing as individual shapes, and not a whole vine, flower, or person. Although it took a few tries, sketching with pencil directly to the paper achieved the organic feel I could not reproduce directly on the computer. After I would sketch the elements on paper, I scanned them into the computer to clean up lines and add color in Adobe Photoshop. For the frame, I began with a swirling design that mimicked wrought iron, and combined it with empty space for text to create a frame that was not rigid. Because it was a harsh contrast where the empty space and the interior of the poster met, I connected ends of the wrought iron frame with a vine and leaf illustration. Working with more natural influence and trying to achieve the detailed backgrounds of Art Nouveau posters, I used layered patterns of the vine for the background with different opacities to add depth. I broke up the green and tan tones with orange and red flowers.
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With the background and frame complete, my last challenge was drawing the woman. My first attempts were from a head-on point of view, in which the posture and facial expression of the subject were too stoic for the Art Nouveau style. I found that what I needed was a different angle to work with. The off-center view I chose made the figure more dramatic and fit the style better.

I mainly used earthy tones for coloring to further develop the natural, organic spirit of the Art Nouveau style. However, the cool blue of background and her dress help to contrast the warmth and define the foreground and background. Though the fine art aspect of the final result may portray amateur drawing at best, this Art Nouveau execution proved to be the greatest challenge for me. I had to revisit my approach multiple times and fine tune sketches and computer manipulation until I got it right.

DE STIJL

Falling within the modern design period, which lasted from roughly 1908 to 1933, De Stijl rejected excessive ornamentation. The style sought to keep emotion out of design. It was based on rectangles, and used only white, black, gray and primary colors (Heller & Chwast, 1994). Literally meaning “the style” in Dutch, De Stijl’s geometric abstraction sought equilibrium in art (Early Modernism, n.d.).

My inspiration came from Piet Mondrian’s Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow (see Figure 3). The painting uses only thick, black strokes to create rectangular shapes, then filled with primary colors, black, grey, or white. This style, while easier for me to execute, was challenging in the way of needing to be visually interesting without decoration. It is simple and rigid in nature, so I needed to make the color choice and location provide a rhythm. In my
design, I started by marking out my shapes with bold, black lines, then placed my text. For coloring, I began with red in the top left corner to draw the eye in immediately, leading the viewer to the title right below. If I had placed the red anywhere else, the eye would still naturally be drawn to it first, then have to do extra work to find the first entry point of information. The colored rectangles then lead the eye down and over to the description. I chose a faint gray for the rectangle in the lower right corner to interrupt the starkness of the white, which lessened the harsh contrast between opposite corners of the design. The simple use of rectangles and primary colors is what kept this design inherently De Stijl. The rudimentary style did not invoke emotional response. The flow of the colors also achieved the asymmetrical balance of the design style, providing a natural rhythm.

ART DECO

Also referred to as “jazz style” in America, Art Deco was at its height from 1925 to 1940 (Art Deco, n.d.). It combined hints of Art Nouveau and Bauhaus design and Egyptian decoration, like sunbursts and lightning bolts. The style combined extravagance and ornamentation with industrial culture (Heller & Chwast, 1994). Shapes were flat with little detail, and typography was often geometric, with straight lines and hard angles (Art Deco, n.d.).

I drew inspiration for my original poster from Art Deco style posters featuring cityscapes (see Figure 4). The basics of these posters were the respective city’s skyline and a background accentuated with either elements that would naturally be part of the scene, like clouds, stars, or
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mountains, or a decorative element, like the Egyptian sunburst. I then applied this approach to my home city of Indianapolis. I gave the shapes of the skyline some simple dimension, while remaining flat in color detail. This allowed the shapes to be recognizable as buildings, but not stray away from the simple style by cluttering it with windows and extra details. To liven up the background I used a sunburst, an element adapted from Egyptian design. All lines were kept straight with defined angles were pertinent to maintain a geometric feel throughout, which reflects the industrial feel of Art Deco, different from the organic nature of Art Nouveau. I used just two colors to lean a bit further away from the decorative side, but used different shades to add subtle contrast. This approach also added a bit of dimension to the poster without being overly detailed and cluttering simple design.

SWISS INTERNATIONAL

Beginning around 1945, Swiss International brought minimalism to design. Also known as “The International Typographic Style,” it focused on universality and usefulness, but with a touch of geometric abstraction (Swiss International, n.d.). This graphic style was characterized by a lack of ornamentation, sans-serif typography, and object photography. Swiss International also demanded strict composition on a grid, which became the most important tool in design practice (Heller & Chwast, 1994).
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My personal design style draws heavily from De Stijl and Swiss International elements. I like the simplicity of white space and allowing photographs to tell a story over illustration. As a news designer, I design on a grid every day. Therefore, I thought I would be most comfortable while recreating those two styles. What proved most challenging was highlighting the differences between the two in my original posters.

I first drew inspiration for my Swiss International from a Müller Brockmann poster (see Figure 5). I was drawn to the abstraction and listed text style. The first drafts of my Swiss International creation used mostly rectangular shapes to represent the idea of a grid in abstract form. However, the strict use of rectangles with no other geometric shapes made the design too similar to De Stijl. I had to consider forms other than squares and rectangles, which are what I naturally associated with the term “geometric.” However, it also refers to shapes like circles and triangles. Using the latter as my new dominant shape, I used the natural diagonal as a dynamic line of reference, rotating my title to match the tilt. I was able to create a design that was composed on a grid, but was not purely rectangular in shape. I also used the listing style for my text. Breaking out individual pieces of written information paired with a brief heading allowed for more useful consumption, where the viewer can easily spot what they need to know. This idea of useful function was important in the Swiss International design style.
POSTMODERNISM

Postmodern design mixed previous styles with new technology, and sought to achieve a widely accepted commercial appearance (Heller & Chwast, 1994). This graphic style began around 1975, using texture and overlapping shapes (Postmodernism, n.d.). Looking for a mix of practicality and the unconventional, postmodernism featured floating geometric shapes, sawtooth edges, interrupting shapes and lines, pastel colors, and disorderly typography (Heller & Chwast, 1994).

When I first began my poster for postmodernism, I was not sure if I was working on elements that I would actually use in the end, or just experimenting with different ideas. The result was a mixture of both. Because my personal design style relied on simplicity, characteristics such as “overlapping shapes,” “disorderly typography,” and “sawtooth edges” were not approaches I would normally consider. I drew initial inspiration for my design from a poster by William Longhauser (see Figure 6). Ultimately finding direction for my poster, though, came from sampling different letters, shapes, and lines to ultimately create new shapes. I contrasted curves with straight edges and solid colors with patterns of lines. The faint grid in the background represents practicality, while the collage style and abstract letters stand for the unconventional.
This project was not a simple exercise of my creative ability. It was designed to challenge and expand my knowledge of historical design styles. Additionally, I learned to recognize the styles in real world situations, whether it was propaganda posters in history books or the architecture of buildings. I traveled to southern Alabama during Spring Break to visit family, and while driving through downtown Mobile, I suddenly realized how much Art Nouveau influence was present. There was intricate wrought iron woven with vines and colorful plant life everywhere. It was that moment that gave me a new appreciation for my creative project and what I was learning from it.

This project allowed me to refine new creative styles and become more confident in taking new approaches in my work. Looking back, however, I think different parameters would have pushed me to grow even more. If I were to repeat the process, I would challenge myself further by taking a predetermined set of textual and visual elements, and representing the same content in each graphic style. This task would have forced me to not only think about how and why the content would be presented in historical context, but what the best way to represent it would be based on the characteristics of each design style. I hope to carry this challenge into my future work, whether it be personal projects or professional assignments, so I may continue broadening and refining creative abilities and demonstrate that I know not just how to execute, but why to use, a certain design style.
References


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With roots in 1880s Europe, this graphic style uses organic elements in its design. Posters would often portray an idealized woman, illustrated using simple, black strokes, and soft earth tones to fill. Typography is usually hand-drawn in a curvilinear manner.
This graphic style falls within the early modern period, which lasted from about 1908 to 1933. This era was about industrialization, not ornamentation. De Stijl sought to keep emotion out of design. The style is based on rectangles and black, white, gray, and primary colors. Typography is heavy and bold.
From 1925 to 1940, this design style brought decoration and industrial culture together. Art Deco — also known as "jazz style" in the United States — blended old styles and new inspirations. Designs were comprised of flat, geometric shapes with little detail; aerodynamic forms; and Egyptian ornamentation, like zigzags and sunbursts.
YEARS 1945 - 1985

ALTERNATE NAME "The International Typographic Style"

PURPOSE Practical, universal design

THE BASICS Sans-serif typography, lack of ornamentation, strict composition on grid, object photography

TYPEFACES Frutiger, Helvetica
From about 1975 to 1990, post-modern design pulled different characteristics from past graphic styles. Some even referred to it as “artistic cross-pollination.” The style is characterized by floating, geometric shapes and disorderly typography. Colors tend to be pastel and elements are layered to create texture. This approach sought to mix practicality and the unconventional.