

Making History: A Graphic Design Studio

SAM FOX SCHOOL | COMMUNICATION DESIGN | F10.ART.425D

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Spring 2023
Weil 120
Mon & Wed
4–6:50 PM

Material objects are more than forms; they are evidence of social worlds. In this studio course, students explore historical research methods and contexts for design. Hands-on lessons with primary objects and sites will inform a robust, self-guided studio project that makes an argument about the past. Students will be assessed formatively on workshops and “field notes” (a collection of the semester’s research), and summatively on the project that emerges from this research. Some student work may be selected for inclusion in the forthcoming book *Thinking Through Graphic Design History*.

Prerequisites: Word & Image 2 or permission of instructor

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**Learning
outcomes**

RESEARCH & PROCESS

- Gather information in a dedicated journal or notebook (“field notes”)
- Examine primary sources in archives, collections
- Find and examine secondary sources
- Determine appropriate scope of investigation and articulate intent in a project proposal
- Translate research into criteria for making
- Ideate broadly and refine iterations
- Participate meaningfully in critiques, activities, and group discussions
- Negotiate ideas and feedback from multiple sources

CONCEPT

- Identify approaches to historical research
- Connect objects to contexts and plural narratives
- Form and articulate a researchable question and, eventually, a situated historical argument

FORM

- Present historical argument using graphic design language (word + image)
- Realize concept in polished visual strategies
- Make formal choices based on historical understanding (not reference, necessarily)

CRAFT

- Demonstrate attention to detail and care in the manufacture and presentation of field notes, workshop results, and final project

Making History

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Projects

FIELD NOTES

ONGOING

Throughout the semester, you will be asked to respond in a dedicated journal or sketchbook (provided) to a number of prompts. These prompts will be based on readings and resources, guest speakers, archive visits, and field trips. Each prompt is worth a portion of your field notes grade. If you miss a prompt, your grade will be lowered. The field notes will be graded at midterm and again at semester's end.

WORKSHOP 1: OBJECT LESSONS ZINE

FOUR WEEKS

You will encounter a number of primary sources in archives at WashU. You will be asked to choose one primary source and then find secondary sources to complement your research about it. From this, you will create a short zine that explores this object in context (whether, social, technical, political, or all of the above).

WORKSHOP 2: MINOR TEXTS (WITH JESSICA BARNES, KENT STATE)

TWO WEEKS

In this short workshop instigated by guest designer Jessica Barnes, you will learn to perform a content analysis on a selection of texts (design manifestos). Then, you will use these texts as the basis for a 'cut up' exercise.

WORKSHOP 3: MNEMONICS (WITH CHRIS LEE, PRATT)

TWO WEEKS

In this short workshop instigated by guest designer Chris Lee, you will consider the social role and political functions of documents. You will interrogate the document's truth claims and consider alternative claims.

WORKSHOP 4: CULTURAL MATERIALS

TWO WEEKS

In this workshop, we will explore how cultural materials relate to public memory. The class will work together to make a critical taxonomy based on a prominent motif in the visual culture of St. Louis. We will use this taxonomy as the basis for a practice-based research exercise.

OPEN PROJECT

EIGHT WEEKS

You will propose a self-guided studio project based on themes, observations, or questions that emerge from your field notes. It is important to form a project with manageable outcomes. The first deliverable of this assignment is a brief proposal and the final outcome will be due at semester's end. Your goal is to use communication design to make a historical argument. Throughout the semester, you'll see many examples of historical arguments in readings, artist talks, and exhibitions (keep track of them in your field notes). Such an argument can take the form of interpretation: telling a story based on evidence found in sources. It can also be interrogational: presenting of an overlooked narrative or questioning an exclusion.

Making History

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Please see project sheets and/or Canvas for more specific information about deadlines and lessons.

WEEK 1 – What is this class?

January 18 *Overview, Jenny Akins visit*

WEEK 2 – What is history?

January 23 *Knowledge, Time, History Myths*

January 25 *Survey & Canon; Show & Tell*

WEEK 3 – Object lessons

January 30

February 1 *Workshop 1a: WUSTL Special Collections*

WEEK 4 – Object lessons

February 6 *Workshop 1b: MGHL*

February 8 *Work session, Secondary Sources, Zines*

WEEK 5 – Collection lessons

February 13 *Field Trip to Vashon Museum*

February 15 *Work session (Zines)*

WEEK 6 – Text lessons

February 20 *Workshop 1 Zine due,*
Workshop 2 begins, Jessica Barness visit

February 22 *Workshop 2 due*

WEEK 7 – Text lessons

February 27 *Heidi Kolk visit*

March 1 *Sarita Sundar visit, Field Notes progress check*

WEEK 8 – Site lessons

March 6 *Arch Visit, Intro Workshop 4*

March 8 *MoHis Visit, Project Proposal due*

WEEK 9 – Spring Break

March 13 *No class*

March 15 *No class*

WEEK 10 – Project Work

March 20 *Project proposal feedback returned*

March 22 *Workshop 3, Chris Lee visit*

WEEK 11 – Project Work

March 27 *Workshop 3 due*

March 29 *Project presentations*

WEEK 12 – Project Work

April 3 *Workshop 4, part 1*

April 5 *Project critiques*

WEEK 13 – Project Work

April 10

April 12 *Project critiques*

WEEK 14 – Project Work

April 17 *Workshop 4, part 2*

April 19 *Project critiques*

WEEK 15 – Project Work

April 24 *Field Notes due*

April 26 *Final Project due*

WEEK 16 – Finals Week

May 1 *No class, Reading Day (Final Reviews)*

May 3 *No class*

Workshop 1: Object Lessons

MAKING HISTORY | F10.ART.425D | TOPPINS

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Spring 2023

Weil 120
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Looking closely at historical objects provides surprising inquests into social, political, and technological worlds. In this workshop, you will make direct observations of primary sources, seek more information in secondary sources, and make a short zine about your research.

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Pre-work

Complete Reading Response #2 in your field notes.

Read the following:

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, & Sarah Anne Carter (2015). *Tangible Things*.
Introduction and Chapter 4
Bonnie Mak. (2011) *How the Page Matters*. Introduction and Chapter 1.

Respond to these questions:

Observe in your field notes what kinds of historical arguments come up in the excerpts from *Tangible Things* and *How the Page Matters*. Regarding things: why do you think direct observation is valuable or important? How might this lead to historical insights that are distinct from written records? Regarding the page—this reading will give you much-needed background info for our first archive visit. What is one insight that surprised you about Mak's reading? What are you curious to learn more about?

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At the archive

We will visit two archives at WashU where you will encounter primary sources. First, we'll go to the Special Collections library (in Olin) where Cassie Brand will give us a hands-on lecture about book history and we will have a direct observation session with historical books. Next, we'll go to the MGH (west campus) where Skye Lacerte will facilitate a direct observation session with historical artifacts of illustration and graphic design. In each session, you will work in groups and respond in your field notes to the observations of that day. You will be allowed to take notes, draw with pencils, and take photos at the archives.

IN CLASS : FEBRUARY 1 & 6

The following list of questions comes from Dr. Jonathan Mekinda, a design historian at UIC.

Begin by asking yourself questions about content, context, and significance. Such as:

- What kind of collection are you examining? Are the materials from a person, group, corporation, or institution? Something else altogether? What is/are its subject(s)?
- How do the materials look? What are they made of? What kinds of information do they contain? What details catch your eye? Conversely, what do you find uninteresting?
- What do you know about how the archive was assembled?
- What do the materials tell us about visual culture in specific times and places? How do they convey that information? What do they tell us about life broadly?

Workshop 1: Object Lessons

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At the archive

CONTINUED

- What do the materials tell us about design? How was it practiced and used in its time? By whom? For what ends?
- Are there other “frames” that might be productive?

Also ask questions about yourself:

- What assumptions and biases are you bringing to your review? Are the materials what you expected? How did you form your expectations? What could you do to shift your expectations?
- What additional information do you need or want in order to understand the material more fully? Where would you look for it?
- How might you write/design/construct history using these materials? Do they illustrate a singular story, or could they serve as a case study of a broader condition?

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Homework

Choose one object from these archive visits. Then, for homework, find secondary sources to expand your knowledge on this object.

Make a short zine (8 pgs, 1 letter-sized sheet of paper—there’s a video tutorial posted to Canvas) based on your research about these objects. Consider the form: the small size, the two sides. As we discussed in the workshop: the form of the book engenders unique possibilities in reading. How will you exploit them here?

There will be an in-class work session on Feb 15.

For the final deliverable, make a copy of your zine for each member of the class including your professor. That way, we all have a little library at the end.

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Deadline

The zine is due February 20.

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Goals

SUCCESS IN THIS PROJECT MEANS:

- You fully engaged in the on-site archival research: examining primary sources in archives
- You found relevant secondary sources to expand on observations made at archives
- You synthesized your research into a thoughtful response conceptually and visually
- Your project demonstrates intentional craft

OBJECT LESSON ZINE

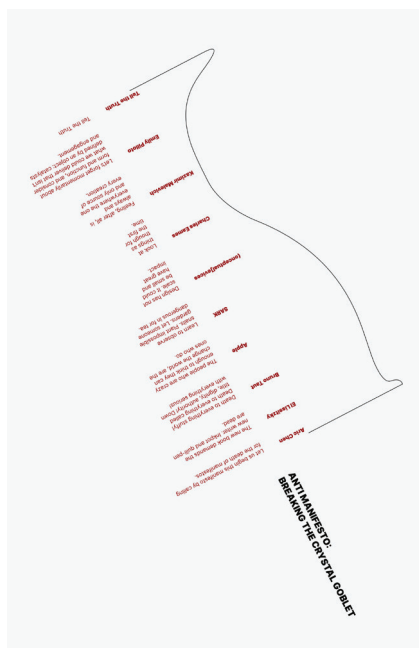
Phoebe Santalla



Following visits to two archives, students chose a primary source to continue studying (finding their own secondary sources). Then, they made short zines about their findings. Phoebe Santalla responded to the Aunt Jemima Collection at WashU's Dowd Illustration Research Archive, telling the origin story of this brand mascot without reproducing images of racist stereotypes. Phoebe focused instead on the men who developed aunt Jemima, their motives, and the social consequences.

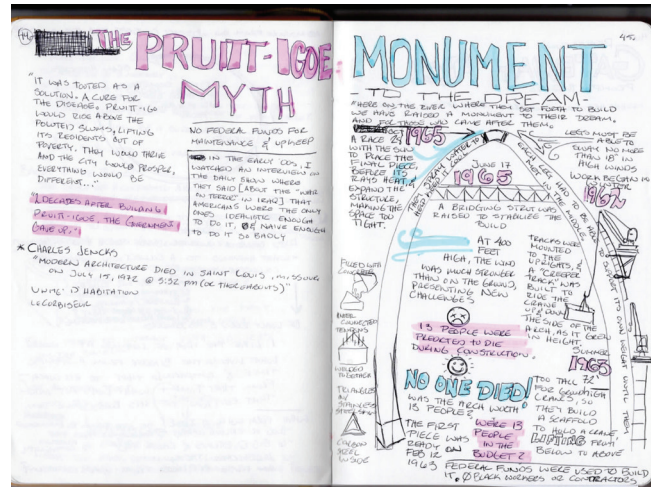
CUT-UP MANIFESTO

LEFT: Christine Bi, RIGHT: Cora Trout



Students worked with visiting lecturer Jessica Barnes to perform a content analysis on a number of design manifestos. In class, they collaboratively authored a new manifesto using a cut-up strategy. Then, each student individually designed broadsides that expressed their own ideas.

LEFT: Erin Lee, RIGHT: Jeffrey Johnson



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FINAL (OPEN) PROJECT

Incense Burner

Gallery 120



Look

Take a sniff. Do you smell anything? Oranges? Pepper? Maybe cinnamon? If you were at a wedding or party in medieval Persia, you would smell smoke called **incense** escaping from the holes of this bronze bird. What markings and patterns do you see on the bird's wings?

Write

What are some of your favorite smells? Write what they make you think of!

For their final projects, students engaged in a self-guided, research-based critical project. After noticing that all the non-western collections at the St. Louis Art Museum were located in the museum's peripheral spaces (the basement and furthest walls from the center), Cora Trout made a family guide to direct children to objects in these collections.

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FINAL (OPEN) PROJECT

Christine Bi

Christine Bi's final project was a robust book that told the story of 404, an abandoned city in China. Bi gathered evidence in the form of photographs, testimonials, and scans of primary sources from archives. Her goal was to tell a personal story from the perspective of the people who lived there, in contrast to more common nationalist narratives.

