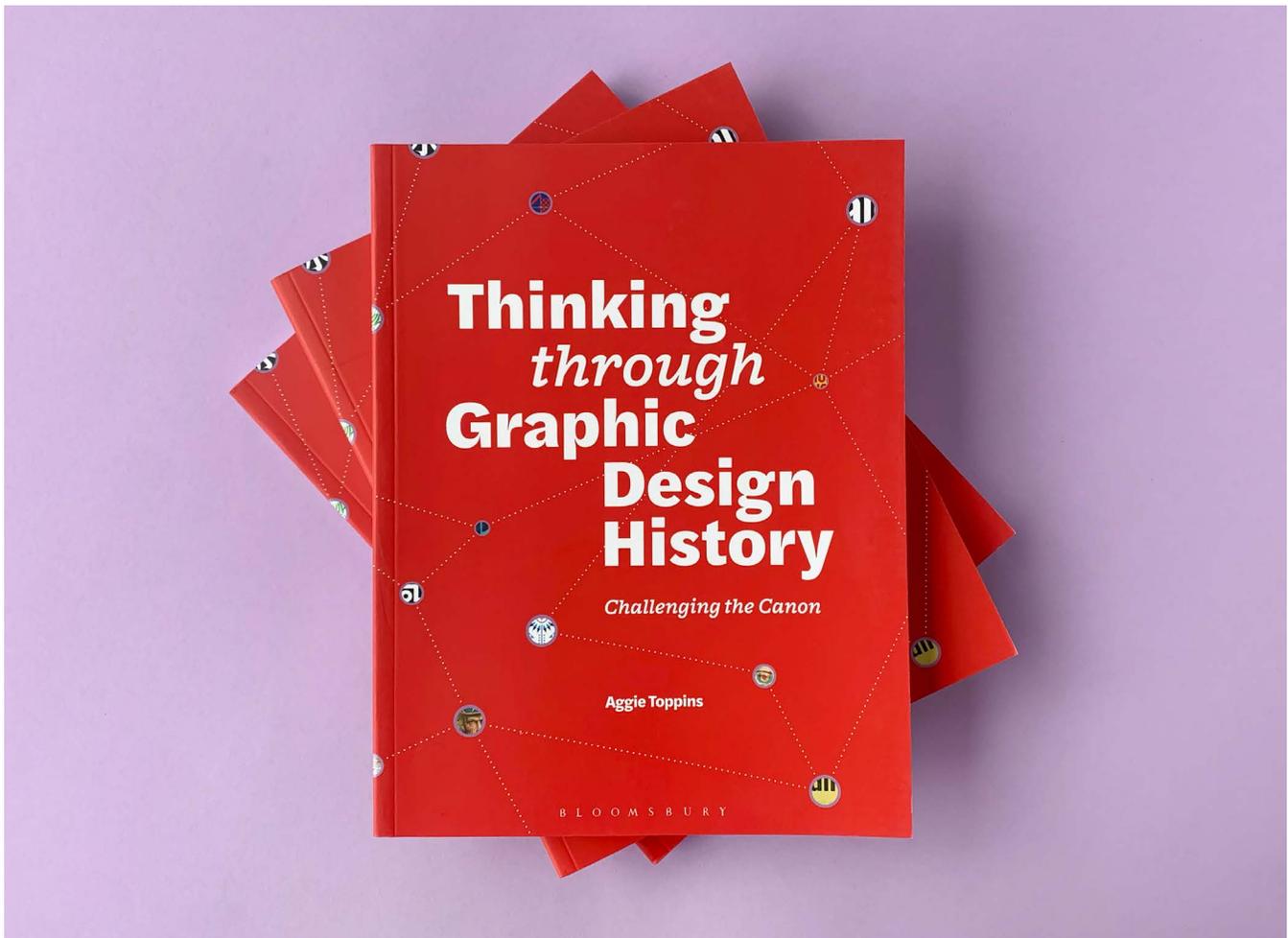


## Aggie Toppins

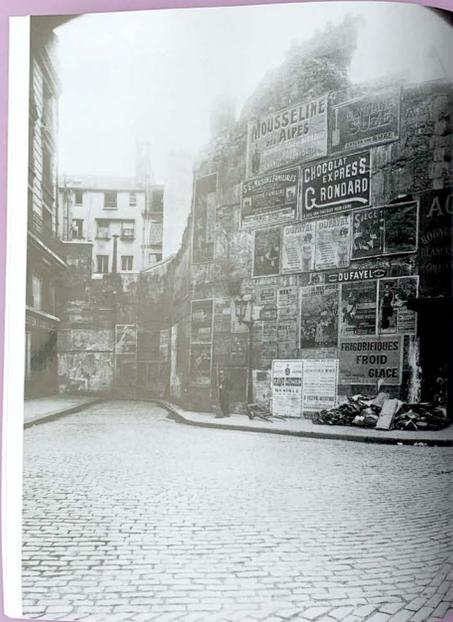
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**Overview**

*Thinking Through Graphic Design History* sketches the terrain where historical thinking and graphic design practice meet. Written for college students, design educators, and designers, this 336-page survey combines theoretical exploration with practical application. The author interrogates traditional approaches to graphic design history and explains how historical research methods help designers shape socially engaged, critical practices. The book makes a contribution to graphic design and design history by bridging scholarship and practice, advocating for a “social turn” in these disciplines.



# Toppins



## CHAPTER 1

### Historiography

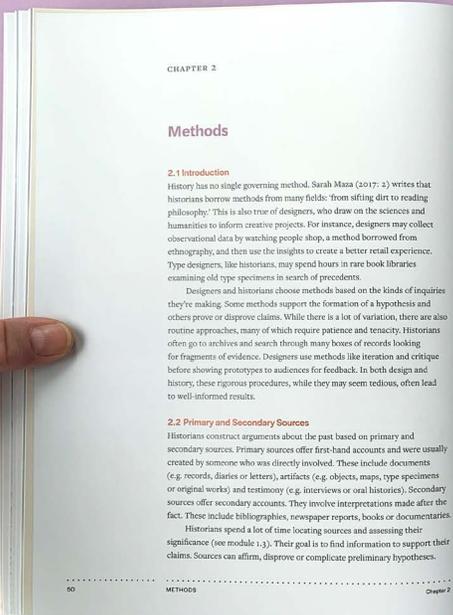
#### 1.1 Introduction

Imagine yourself walking into this image of Paris in the late nineteenth century (figure 3). With your feet planted on those cobblestones, what do you think this world is like? How does it feel? What does it sound and smell like? Do you think this setting is similar to your time and place, or is it different? What do you make of the posters on the side of that building? Where do you think they came from and how were they made? What do you want to learn about them and how would you go about doing that?

This chapter discusses how historians approach these kinds of questions, and how much they've disagreed over the years on best practices. Historiography refers to the history, theory and principles of writing history. Historiographies are systematic inquiries into the historian's process: from examining sources to interpreting facts to crafting narratives.

Historiography shows us how varied historical methodology is and how it has evolved over time. Methodology is the theoretical armature that shapes research and analysis. Returning to the street scene shown here, we could use an art historical approach and study the aesthetic qualities of these posters. Some seem to be large lithographs and others look like smaller, letterpress-printed broadsides. To learn more about them, we could look at examples in an archive or a museum. Another methodology might inquire into the social life of the posters. In the mid-nineteenth century, Paris was redesigned to be a modern city with grand boulevards and tall buildings whose flat surfaces provided ideal space for advertising. We could ask: How did people encounter these posters and what did they think of them? How did advertising relate to shopping behaviors and changes in domestic life? Through yet another lens, we could study the division of labor behind these posters. We could ask how many people worked on these designs, what were they paid and what skills did they need to produce them? By using one approach or another, or by blending aspects of different methodologies, historians can study the same topic and arrive at very different stories.

FIGURE 3 This late nineteenth-century street scene shows how large, printed advertisements appeared in context. Photo by Eugène Atget. George Eastman Museum/Getty Images.



## CHAPTER 2

### Methods

#### 2.1 Introduction

History has no single governing method. Sarah Mass (2017: 2) writes that historians borrow methods from many fields: "from sifting dirt to reading philosophy." This is also true of designers, who draw on the sciences and humanities to inform creative projects. For instance, designers may collect observational data by watching people shop, a method borrowed from ethnography, and then use the insights to create a better retail experience. Type designers, like historians, may spend hours in rare book libraries examining old type specimens in search of precedents.

Designers and historians choose methods based on the kinds of inquiries they're making. Some methods support the formation of a hypothesis and others prove or disprove claims. While there is a lot of variation, there are also routine approaches, many of which require patience and tenacity. Historians often go to archive and search through many hours of records looking for fragments of evidence. Designers use methods like iteration and critique before showing prototypes to audiences for feedback. In both design and history, these rigorous procedures, while they may seem tedious, often lead to well-informed results.

#### 2.2 Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians construct arguments about the past based on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources offer first-hand accounts and were usually created by someone who was directly involved. These include documents (e.g. records, diaries or letters), artifacts (e.g. objects, maps, type specimens or original works) and testimony (e.g. interviews or oral histories). Secondary sources offer secondary accounts. They involve interpretations made after the fact. These include bibliographies, newspaper reports, books or documentaries.

Historians spend a lot of time locating sources and assessing their significance (see module 1.3). Their goal is to find information to support their claims. Sources can affirm, disprove or complicate preliminary hypotheses.



FIGURE 13 The Chinese Type Archive (2020), created by Synoptic Office, is an interactive reference for designers working with Chinese typography. It includes key concepts, techniques and a bibliography of sources.

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Claims are not considered credible unless there are multiple pieces of evidence to support them. Historians can spend years gathering sources for one project.

Primary sources in design can be found in archives, museum collections and libraries. These institutions often house collectible objects, like books and posters, that someone in the past thought were important enough to save. Sometimes primary sources are kept by designers in their homes, at their companies or at schools they were associated with. Because design is the stuff of everyday life, primary sources can also be found at estate sales, thrift stores or in basements and attics. In such places, we may find more ephemeral items, like packaging or letterheads.

# Toppins



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**Outcomes**

Published in February 2025, *Thinking Through Graphic Design History* is already making an impact in the classroom. Educators from Leeds to Louisiana have added it to their syllabi, and the book has been collected by more than 50 institutions worldwide. Toppins has been invited to discuss the book with audiences of peers across the United States and Europe, including the School of Visual Arts' D-Crit program, the Design Principles & Practices conference in Singapore, and Svenska Tecknare in Sweden. The author, who also designed the book, was recognized by the University & College Designers Association (UCDA) with a Silver Award. Toppins has also appeared on the *Underscore* podcast and, as a former guest on *Scratching the Surface*, was interviewed by Jarret Fuller for the podcast's substack.

See *Thinking Through Graphic Design History* on:

[Bloomsbury's web site](#)

[Scratching the Surface blog](#)

[Svenska Tecknare](#)

[UCDA Silver Award](#)

[Underscore podcast](#)

[Interview on WashU's \*The Source\*](#)

[WorldCat Records 1, 2, and 3.](#)