

Guadalajara Design History Conference – 2004

**A proposed model for creating a design history of a non-western, post-colonial country: Using the case of India and Graphic Design**

Bali proverb: “We have no art, we just do the best we can.”

INTRO

Histories of Indian architecture, Indian art and Indian craft have been written. However, the messy stepchild of them all—Design—remains without its genealogy laid out or its presence understood within the Indian context. Given the importance of design to the project of modernism in many developing countries, and its solid foothold in India, I propose here a model for writing its Indian history, separating Graphic Design from Industrial Design for purposes of clarity, where possible. I want to emphasize that what I propose here is highly speculative and represents, for me, the start of a particular inquiry.

Imagine the position of project director for creating the History of Graphic Design in India. How might such an individual conceive of and organize this huge endeavor? Who would be the collaborators? How and where would the team start? Who directs the project is not the issue here, though not unimportant.

EX Taj photo

EX Sangam movie poster

An example here of the Taj Mahal (though it probably needs no label). I think it telling for our current discussion that this extravagant and widely admired building (itself a mixture of architectural and decorative styles)—built by a Muslim hereditary ruler in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to hold the tomb of his wife, in an expression of the most private emotions of love and grief, has become the best understood metonym for India, a modern industrial, democratic, and officially secular, but majority Hindu, country – and that this is literally ‘unremarkable’ (except that I do). Thus I introduce the theme of mixture or hybridity or synthesis.

A brief digression about terminology:

‘Hybridity’ is the current term now, especially in identity discussions relating to colonial history. This term is useful, but I will also use ‘synthesis,’ which is not the same. According to the dictionary, a hybrid (biologically) is a combination of two into a new whole, by grafting or breeding. In most cases, the characteristics of the parts are identifiable within the result. On occasion, the term has had negative connotations. An example for design might be a common critical reaction to Victorian Indian architecture.

EX Victoria Terminal

EX Varma ptg

Synthesis is a form of combination where a wholly new entity is produced, with the parts no longer readily discernable. Here, an example might be the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma who absorbed western painting to produce his mythical paintings and portraits. Of another nature is the long-standing Indian synthesis of art and craft. In the case of India, ‘synthesis’ has been used by older historians, and there has been a certain national pride in being able to absorb new ideas (whether voluntary or imposed).

Designers in other colonial situations, Steiner and Haas in Hong Kong, have written about design practices that “weave and transmute the strands of two contrasting traditions into a statement that is neither and both.”<sup>1</sup> Sauthoff, with African experience, writes that “... culturally specific elements of iconography, typography, symbolism, and style are mixed, melded, and transformed by means of quotation, mimicry, and appropriation.”<sup>2</sup> Others use the term ‘transformation’ to describe new mixed productions. I don’t wish to engage linguistic/semantic debate here; I only clarify my use of the terms.

EX movie poster - Mughal

The Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky, a useful theorist before and now, said: find the solution within the problem. Big projects benefit from visionary metaphors; rather than the tired Taj, I propose using Bollywood here. The Bollywood movie, a quintessential product of modern industrialized India, is a hybrid form: highly popular storytelling based on narratives, characters and themes from mythic Indian literature and contemporary life, using expensive and expansive Western moviemaking technology; mixing several

genres from action thriller to romantic chick flick through religious and values instruction, 'westerns,' musicals and comedies; breaking out with songs from classical Indian and pop music, enlivened by dances from several Indian traditions, overlaid with the intense and vibrant colors of Indian art and craft, with additions from Hollywood, Broadway and music videos.

#### EX movie billboard

So how is this rich example useful for our project? Modern India exemplifies a contemporary and democratic developing nation: millennia of traditions, multiple native and conquering cultures including the final British colonizing one, and a current absorption of Western, especially American, culture and goods. Modern India is both a hybrid and a synthesis. To study the development of what we now call 'graphic design' there, a variety of methods and theories will be useful. Our 'subject' is a mixture and our methods must be too.

#### DEFINE GD INDIA

Given the long and complicated genealogy of Indian visual culture, how do we define that area of creative activity we are calling Indian graphic design (admittedly a modern term)? Categorizing by product or result may be too anachronistic; using function may help bridge the time frames. Though undoubtedly we will stray into other design areas, let us start with those materials and products that have inspired, delighted, informed, persuaded, and maybe even incited the Indian people.

#### EX rel. callig figure

EX callig, wall, politics

EX logo, TV station

EX pkg, fireworks, Krishna

EX pol wall mural

EX calendar, drug co, rel subject

These would be materials and articles for worship and spiritual growth; calligraphy and typefaces; manuscripts, books, periodicals, newspapers; public messages, posters, signs and hoardings; movie and television graphics; advertising, labeling and packaging; personal and corporate identity; signage and wayfinding; political graphics; popular and vernacular materials like calendars; and anything else written or drawn for such purposes.

#### AGENDA

What is the agenda of this 'history' effort? For whom is the team working and for what purposes? As all areas of design develop in their contemporary social and economic settings, and as Indian design education matures, there is a need to know, understand, and teach the richness of the Indian graphic design patrimony: what has been thought, made, traded, used, read, discarded, exhibited, and collected by those before. Design practitioners, students, consumers, collectors, and clients want to know the cultural and historical context of what they make and what they 'consume.'

To discover what was, and now is, Indian graphic design, questions must be asked of artifacts, practices, and practitioners. What are these questions, and of what objects? The answers will be found in the study that is to come. My purpose here is to propose an outline for the inquiry; for illustrative purposes and visual interest I will show some examples of design objects and suggest many possible questions and few answers.

#### EX wedding entrance

EX pted cart

EX pkg, fireworks, movie stars

EX ms, Arabic

EX book illus

EX The Week cover

What do we want to know about and from materials and artifacts like these?

#### METHODS

The object types mentioned are the modern manifestations of the need to communicate in visual ways; to protect goods; to make gifts; to distribute ideas; to promote products; to identify organizations and to establish social and economic position. They make up what Sumathi Ramaswamy calls the “dense and complicated picture-worlds, print-complexes and image cultures of India.”<sup>3</sup>

In thinking about the methods to be used for this study, I have found the work of H. Kumar Vyas invaluable. To understand current objects and practices one method is to turn to older examples and understand the original intentions; to discover how, why and when new forms developed to address new needs. He argues for students knowing the history of design processes and the idioms of Indianness, and functional archetypes.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on Western historian’s bias for linear chronology, for developmental cause and effect, Vyas, in his book *Design: the Indian Context*, has pointed out several problems with this related to studying Indian history. He believes a historical survey of Indian design forms (images, object systems, communications, environments) to establish some “historical rationale of Indian design idioms” could be undertaken, requiring periodic connection of artifacts to Indian history to show points of discovery, innovation, etc. He states that this “classical European model presupposes an unbroken cultural tradition and a social habit of maintaining records of events and preserving antiquities;”<sup>5</sup> both of which do not exist in India. At root is a different sense of history: Indian philosophy teaches a detachment from the man-made once an artifact has served its intended purpose. Though “created and used with the utmost love and care” the object is allowed to “float away in the ‘river of time.’”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Vyas suggests a ‘lateral approach’ where the historian examines “the issues of design history against the on-going interface between tradition and modernity.”<sup>7</sup> He claims this is not comparative history but rather a “journey into historical facts—as well as conjectures—which are live and mutually interactive.”<sup>8</sup>

Vyas’s asks a basic question: “Does there exist, or did there ever exist, an approach equivalent to what we today recognize as design?”<sup>9</sup> He would suggest questions be asked of artifacts that would tell the story of evolution, collective acts of innovation over time and space. Questions that would explore human cognition, problem solving, planning, tool use, materials availability, manual manipulation, specializations, formal vocabulary, and functions of communication.<sup>10</sup>

Different from western ideas, Indian philosophies and arts have expressed a unity of time and space; time does not pass but people do, and time is cyclical. They consider their great epics to be their history: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are not ‘myths’ in the western sense. These epics are not imaginative fairy tales but “an historical format ... [that has been] deliberately employed to make people use it as a point of reference to continuously evolve and influence the living patterns and attitudes of human societies of the past, present and future.”<sup>11</sup> Here “... the past, representing every age of human endeavor, can influence the contemporary lives and thoughts and the quality of human relationships ... and this knowledge can help us pass against the static backdrop of time.”<sup>12</sup> In the continuum of existence, the chronicles of the past are to be used pragmatically and creatively to help in the present.

Vyas registers some historical or temporal divisions from prehistoric through, first, regional tribal cultures, then Hindu and Mughal cultures, to modern times for craft activities. He connects objects and environments with those responsible, noting their skills and evident visual and material ‘sensibilities.’<sup>13</sup> Aesthetics are based on literary works; no distinctions are made between religious objects and mundane domestic ones. Central to Indian aesthetic philosophy is the unified concept of Kalaa embracing all aspects of human arts, crafts, skills and techniques (both art and techne).<sup>14</sup> Only with the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is a conscious split required.

Vyas, and his colleague S. Balaram, have both suggested that an ‘eastern’ approach to history might be used for ancient times, and a ‘western’ one for the study of India since the Turkish invasions and Mughal empire (beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD).

Accepting the combination of perspectives, as well as the complexity of material evidence, a team approach is obvious. Building on the various intellectual and methodological strengths of many disciplines, the team would include scholars from the several fields that will highlight the existence of the intersecting needs, ideas, practices and materials over time. For this broad-based approach I find confirmation in Ramaswamy’s recent edited volume *Beyond Appearances: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern*

*India* that brings together scholars of visual studies coming from many of the fields. Our broad hybrid model needs experts in the following:

EX store signs

History for understanding larger political, economic and social contexts; history of technologies.

EX painted temple

Religion to understand the basic beliefs, narratives, characters, and the purpose of objects.

EX craft stamps

Cultural anthropology for understanding the cultural contexts of production, the use and meaning of objects and the developments in hand-based craft.

EX Rubiyat

Languages and literatures to understand the written forms, interpretations of themes and characters, and the distribution of ideas.

EX temple wall mural

Art/arch/craft history to understand the different image-making traditions, materials and meaning, as well as the spatial contexts for objects, and how various skills were taught and traditions handed down.

EX movie poster=Mahabarata

Performing Arts to incorporate the developments from oral history to performance of history, including dance, theater, music and film studies.

EX bamboo

EX textiles

Material and technology scholars to explain geographic availabilities and hand to mechanical manufacturing possibilities.

Business experts to explain developments in trade and industry; marketing history and research.

It is obvious that within Indian visual traditions, and their histories, the disciplinary boundaries between the fine arts, crafts, design (or sometimes 'applied arts'), to name only the largest categories, are porous and contested (see later discussion of design education). It was the British who insisted on the separation of art from design; a alien concept for Indian tradition. The larger study will be obliged to acknowledge this philosophical difference and to make careful distinctions only when necessary.

#### CONTEXTS OF INQUIRY

Historical and Modern India presents a breathtaking range of conditions and realities that are the context for design. To suggest the challenging nature of the study's questions it may be useful to briefly describe these, which will also serve to organize the questions in one possible way.

#### RELIGION/ART

EX mandala Jain

In the modern world, 'graphic design' means the combination of words and images to create visual messages. As we have to begin somewhere, and India was and remains for many a primarily oral culture based on spiritual values, the history and meaning of religious texts and images presents a first layer of inquiry into the major religious traditions: Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Christian. This rich oral culture often works with an equally rich visual one. For Hindus, at least, the concept of *darshan*, of gazing upon and being in the presence of a god, is a primary impetus for pilgrimage. How important is the visual in the other religions?

EX ms illus

What are the ancient and contemporary purposes of two-dimensional design in a religious setting? What are the religious texts that pertain to image making within art, craft, and design (all combined in 'kalaa') and

from these, what was produced that foreshadowed graphic design and what principles might pertain to graphic design? In Hinduism the 32 vidyas organize disciplines of knowledge, including grammar, linguistics, architecture, and aesthetics. In addition, among the 64 Kalaas or arts, are those focused on storytelling techniques, decoration, ornament, drawing, painting, architecture, and handicrafts.<sup>15</sup> The last of the 4 Vedas contains a treatise on the construction of space and images, including materials and methods.<sup>16</sup> Other sacred texts, the Shastras, discuss composition (even describing diagrams akin to grids) for the disposition of image parts and symbolism.<sup>17</sup>

EX ms Arabic

The teachings of Islam preclude the making of images or icons for worship, leading to elaborate systems of stylized and calligraphic decoration in their architecture and elaborated letterforms and texts, as well as secular miniature paintings. Until widespread Mughal influence, books were not important in Indian culture; how then did Indian culture respond to this new vehicle for ideas?<sup>18</sup> Within Islam and the other religious traditions, what are the beliefs and practices related to graphic design practices?

### SOCIAL SYSTEMS

With a society highly organized by religious affiliation, how does this form of social organization relate to the making of art, craft and design? The Hindu caste system delineates specific areas of activity, and materials are restricted to certain groups. Do the other religions regulate visual practices and materials in any social manner? Some crafts are community and/ or tribal based. How might these structures and any restrictions have affected the craft practices that fed into the activities we know as graphic design? How have traditional beliefs organized production to include, or not, the products of women? Have there been communicative materials for the special needs of women? As you will undoubtedly notice, color is an important element in the Indian visual world. How is color conceptualized in India? What are its historic, symbolic and practical dimensions?

### GEOGRAPHY

The vast sub-continent has a geographic/climatic range from the frozen forested mountain ranges, through humid jungles, to dry deserts. Obviously, art/craft practices have evolved out of these natural conditions, regional and social needs, and locally available materials. In all of these areas, where certain religious groups and tribes predominate, what have been the traditional materials, skills and resulting forms that have fed into graphic design practices today? How have these changed, or not, due to encounters with other peoples?

EX palm leaves

EX close up palm

How have geography and climate produced different materials? For example, writing substrates differ; in the South they have used the plentiful palm leaves. This material has necessitated its own 'page' proportions, binding methods, writing tools and given specific character to the letterforms. The alphabets of the South tend to be based on curves made easiest with sharp points on soft palm leaves; those of the North are more likely to be pen-based forms adapted to parchment, cloth and paper.

### LANGUAGES

The peoples of India have significantly contributed to the roots of many of our western languages, called Indo-European for their northern Sanskrit parts; our Arabic number system, including the later concept of zero, comes from northern India too. Whereas Europe (and the Americas) then developed several related languages mixed with some local tribal ones, India has experienced the development of many languages, some totally unrelated. It has maintained such strong language groups that the modern nation is organized by them (and still fights language wars, especially around education). The two official languages are Hindi (a northern language) and English, from the colonizers who imposed the governmental and educational structures.

EX gov't sign eng/hind/Malayalam

EX IITB signage

All governmental offices, most public institutions and large corporations work in three languages: Hindi, English and the regional language. In the south there are states that refuse to support the teaching of Hindi

to their children. In one southern state, thanks to decades of local communist rule, the literacy rate (in the local language) is about 91% and the largest newspaper publisher enjoys daily circulation figures of 8 million.

EX newspaper

EX Bengali sign

Hinduism gave priority to the spoken word over the written one. Islam brought 'alien' book traditions which were readily adopted, and books remained handwritten and bound until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Machine letterpress printing was one of first industries to come to India (before the railroad or textile mill). At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the first press was established in Calcutta, and the first typefaces developed were for Bengali script. Several English and vernacular newspapers were published in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> As is true wherever and whenever a printing press is established, it opened communications, spread literacy through newspapers and books, and added magazines, posters, calendars, and product labels to the Indian visual world. Printing also helped the independence movement.<sup>21</sup>

EX calendar, Jain

Color lithography popularized mythological images; calendar art evolved from the synthesizing work of Raja Ravi Varma and other artists influenced by European painting.<sup>22</sup> In the post-Independence era, mass communications allowed governmental contact with people through films, magazines, advertising and television.<sup>23</sup>

EX typewriter

EX devanagari system

The effect of these many languages, and their separate symbolic writing systems, on typography is both limiting, challenging and perhaps paralyzingly open. Practically speaking, Hindi is properly written with about 42 characters in the Devanagari alphabet (derived from reed pen forms). When the British brought in typewriters and began adapting keyboards, some characters were abandoned. For printing purposes, metal typefaces were developed but limited, for many of the same reasons. In more recent times, developments in typesetting technologies have obviated some of the limitations and created many opportunities to address myriad communication needs. However, the country still has to deal with around 14 different official languages, and almost as many alphabets.

EX bank type

Northern and southern alphabets developed from local materials and products. Previously, what were the symbols creating the basis for codified forms? How have the forms in modern times been adapted to developing printing and typesetting technologies? For what new uses and contexts? Communication needs in multiple languages present complex problems for the graphic designer. Organizational or corporate identities must work in several alphabets at the same time, on the same surface. Images and symbols must be understood from multiple perspectives. Or different materials must be produced for multiple audiences. Communication strategies begin with an assessment of 'audience,' in India a task that begins with 'which languages?'

## LITERATURES

EX Hampi

In a society with a large illiterate population, messages are often more pictures than words. There are examples of pedagogic narrative stone carvings from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE relating to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Can early visual/oral strategies be understood today? What are the useful frames of reference for the general population? And what might still be useful in imagery or narrative form? Otherwise, where do images come from?

Were there periods of time notable for literary production and how did these relate to other creative acts in time and place? The cultural backbone of most societies is made up of the shared stories that explain their existence and values, and personified by their heroes. For most of the Indian people these references come from the so-called mythical stories found in the *Ramayana* (the story of the god, Ram) and the *Mahabharata* (the story of Krishna and the warring tribes of Pandavas and Kauravas).

#### EX Ram box

These stories have been told orally and visually for millennia, using myriad techniques and props: theater, puppets, storyboards, murals, dance, and more recently, in movies and television. How have these images and narrative devices affected manuscripts, other book forms and become part of modern graphic and communication practices? Are there regional and material differences?

How have different communities supported the creation and conservation of manuscripts and books? Paper, brought to India by Chinese Buddhist monks in the early Common Era, was widely used by the 11<sup>th</sup> century; local manufacturing began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> What were the effects of readily available paper?<sup>25</sup>

Mural paintings in Ajanta influenced image-making across India; Jain and Buddhist texts were carefully preserved.<sup>26</sup>

#### EX page, binding hole

Depending on substrates used and their particular proportions and qualities, various relationships between text and image have evolved. How have these page compositions influenced modern pages? Beyond book forms, what about the relationships between texts and images on fabric hangings and other materials?

### AUDIENCES

#### EX pted temple wall

Over time how have the Indian people responded to design? Earlier, what was the ‘market’ for art/craft related to communication? What were early trade practices and how far did materials and products travel? In historical terms, how has this question of audience been conceptualized and then realized? Even isolated communities will comprise different groups. While literate audiences may have been very small during the colonial period, what changes occurred when large numbers of Indians became literate and educated?

#### EX sign, bus station

Are the Indian people ‘consumers’ of design? How conscious is the average Indian of design products, choices, communication approaches? Do Indians ‘demand’ design to solve problems: like better textbooks for education or like wayfinding for complex pilgrimage sites? Do they understand enough of its potential to ask for it?

#### EX city signage

How have these audiences changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, related to political change and mass media increases in newspapers, television, movies, mass market publishing? Has India, like the post-industrial revolution West, gone through the modern ‘universalizing’ massification phase to pass on to the more ‘tailored’ niche audience phase? Does this development even make sense for India? Are the numbers so large that even ‘small’ groups are worth designing for? What kinds of visual communication strategies are employed for different audiences?

Audience demographics in India could be organized by the usual gender, age, and socio-economic categories. We have already alluded to a large illiterate population served by, and supporting the need for, what Ramaswamy describes as the “power—and authority—of the visual in the modern Indian public sphere [that] emerges from the fact that it inhabits such an ‘interocular’ or intervisual’ field” due to the overlapping and mixing of so many media.<sup>27</sup> Other modern categories suggest the complexity of the communication problem: levels of education; involvement in different economies; urban or rural residence; access to TV/movies/internet; level of ‘westernization’ through education, travel, work; and the Indian diaspora.

### MARKETS / INDUSTRY

Once the Indian market was opened, when did global consciousness begin and an awareness of a ‘foreign’ audience? Not that imported goods and ideas have not had an influence for decades. As we know, the west has sent TV, movies, music and other forms of pop culture; India has returned the favor with Bollywood, exciting handmade goods, and products of the computer age (especially animation and software).

#### EX Arjad – for muslims in malaysia

### EX Prokash – English like bengali

As the Indian upper classes have sent their children abroad for education, to return or not, a large community of South Asians has developed, especially in English-speaking countries like England and America (an earlier one developed in South Africa, of which Gandhi was a product). This extended Indian family has brought Indian culture to their adopted countries and these new markets have produced the need for some fascinating hybrids of design. Other groups, like the south Indians who are literally building the infrastructure of the Gulf States, have developed new relationships with Arab and Muslim cultures, suggesting new design forms.

### HISTORY

India is a sub-continent with ancient civilizations, conquered several times, loosely organized by regional princes, then by recent colonial power, and only lately a democratic and independent state. Artifacts exist from several civilizations, beginning in 4000 BCE. Since ancient times anonymous skilled workers have been perfecting form to function. (See appreciation for this by Eameses later.)

### EX tribal decoration

Reflecting the Indian sense of history, time frames of reference would be loose and few for the earliest periods. Vyas seems to suggest three: earliest settlements, trade and invading peoples, and colonial to independence. The first two are different for north and south India.<sup>28</sup> Before written records, the approach must be based on comparative ‘types’ and needs understood from remaining material evidence; after written records, the developmental chronology can be easier to trace.

### EX Islamic tile

For long periods India was part of the trading routes from the Far East through the subcontinent to the Middle East and on to Europe. Turkish rulers arrived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and brought the arts, stories and forms of Islam. Helped by the broad sweep of the sultanates and the Mughal empire that lasted over 500 years, architecture and highly decorated objects, new materials, new ideas about pattern and the use of letterforms influenced the indigenous work; Western influences began with early spice traders from Portugal in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The British traders (and then rulers) arrived in force in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, strengthening India’s exposure to Christianity and its stories, and later, bringing ideas of design as related to industry.

### EX Victorian bldg

Colonial India marks the beginning of the country’s modern era: industry and new markets developed. As markets changed, there was an enormous effect on craft and design. When markets changed from local to widely transported distribution, ideas were transported too. What was the effect on local production when imports from very different places/cultures began? Why might the response appear to create more hybrid forms, whereas the Mughal conquest response was more toward synthesis? Did colonialism change local art and design and was this different from its effect on mass produced design?

[Like the example of Khadi for Gandhi, a method for spinning and weaving cloth, symbolizing self-sufficiency—is there an analogy for Indian graphic design? Is there an indigenous form of visual communication that has evolved into the present, that contains meaning in the form itself? Or like the lota (a water vessel) for the Eameses, seeing represented in one object the perfecting of the integration of values with form to purpose over time—is there a ‘lota’ for graphic design? Is there an object used for visual communication whose core, whose archetypical form, has remained constant through changing contexts and materials? For both of these questions, the issue of anonymity of maker(s) is important. Are there forms that have undergone change of meaning during modern times of synthesis? An example might be the appropriation of ‘rangoli’ patterns, traditionally done by women at home entrances with rice flower on a daily basis – now often incorporated into logos. Forms associated with women become universalized; what about those associated with castes, tribes or other identified groups?]

### MODERNISM

One could debate exactly when ‘modernism’ arrived in India; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with British administration, education, industry, and railroads, or with the ideas of self-sufficiency, democracy and independence proclaimed by Gandhi in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. When India became independent in 1947, the



country was democratic with socialist economic planning that kept industries small and protected from outside competition. Prime minister Nehru, influenced by some powerful industrial families, knew something of Western modern design and the work of Le Corbusier when he designed and built some private homes and was then given the Chandigarh commission (to build the capital of the Punjab) in the 1950s.

#### EX NID logos

The ideas of the European Modern Movement took hold through visiting foreign designers, teachers and returning Indians from study abroad, mostly in the post-Independence era. What ‘modernism’ has meant for India is: democracy, mass production, mass communication, increased literacy, obvious influence of Western modern design movements on visual form, and new models for design/art education.

#### DESIGN EDUCATION

Traditionally, Indian craft and art practices were taught on-the-job, often within the same family and/or caste. There were some schools within the gurukul system, where gurus taught resident students traditional music and dance, as well as other subjects.<sup>29</sup> The British established their system of art schools and universities. The art programs at Sir JJ University in Mumbai and at MS University in Baroda are especially well regarded.

Colonial art education, contrary to cultural practices and established philosophy in India, separated art and craft when, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, three schools were established in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Vyas states “The British teachers of these schools had themselves not sorted out the confusion about art and craft. They were not equipped to understand the age-old tradition of craft production in contemporary India. Hence they could only pass on their own confusion to their Indian students. These schools remained the hothouses of an imported education system and compounded the confusion about art and craft initiated by the European Indologists.”<sup>30</sup> It was unfortunate for Indian art/design education that the new system was imposed before the debates in Britain about industrial goods, design and design education reform were resolved.

It is indeed ironic that the leaders of British design and design education reform, Henry Cole and Owen Jones, greatly admired Indian design (its abstracted use of nature, flatness, relationship to 3-D form) and propounded its concepts in their arguments. They, as well as William Morris, also decried the colonial destruction of local ideas and skills in the face of imported products, at the same time as the work was held up as exemplary. Similar to Morris’ ideal of medieval production, other reformers of the period saw the Indian village as an ideal community for the production of the highest quality of designed objects.<sup>31</sup>

The poet Rabindranth Tagore started his experimental Santiniketan in Bengal in 1901 to teach the arts (among other university subjects). In the 1920s, Tagore was aware of Bauhaus methods, but borrowed more from the cultures of China and Japan whose “aesthetic traditions had remained unbroken and compatible with the Indian way of life.”<sup>32</sup>

#### EX IIT G signage

Closer to graphic design (and industrial design), the Nehru government asked the American designers Charles and Ray Eames to study the Indian situation and make recommendations about design education related to Indian industry. The recommendations in their India Report of 1958 created the platform for contemporary Indian design education. In addition to suggesting the nature of the relationship between design and industry, the Eames report recommended the training of teachers in the West and the importing of Western designers for working visits. The immediate result of their work was the 1961 establishment (in Ahmedabad where the textile magnates had first encouraged Le Corbusier) of the National Institute of Design which became the model further propagated at several of the new Indian Institutes of Technology that were established (industrial and communication design in Mumbai, architecture at Kanpur, visual communication at Guwahati).

What has been the effect of each of these systems (colonial, western modern, Indian modern) on design education and on graphic design practice and artifacts? Where have the design educators come from; what backgrounds, education and experiences have they brought into their design and their teaching? These

schools have faculty who have been 'home' trained (NID and Baroda have produced the most) and many have gone abroad; they also accept the visits of foreign design teachers. The programs are established with governmental standards relating to universities and give degrees accordingly; NID is uniquely under the Ministry of Industry and gives certificates. The curricula vary to some extent among the schools, with a core of NID-influenced ideas and approaches.

In this post-Independence era have the various schools and their curricula developed any recognizable approaches to design or design style? What remains 'Indian' in the pedagogy and resulting design work? Is this an on-going issue for educators and designers? How are the teachers approaching the teaching of Indian design history?

Depending on the individual teacher and the program within which he/she teaches, there is more or less demand for academic scholarship within the field in India, especially about design history. There are currently few obvious publishing outlets for this work, leading many to publish within their institutions (NID has a publishing arm, mostly for faculty). The level of distribution is low (especially outside of India) and the audience among educators is small, due to their actual numbers. With few professional organizations and publications, 'trade' magazines don't fill the gap but publish mainly to inform the audience about new work rather than to carry a critical discourse.

#### DESIGN PRACTICE

What has been the nature of 'modern' graphic design practice in India? In what ways has it organized around industry, advertising, corporate departments, small firms or individuals? What craft and trade skills were adapted by those without formal education? What is the nature of the transition from 'trade' to 'profession,' and is it complete? Are the relationships among designers based on familial networks, school friends, geographical proximity, in industrial or governmental sectors? How do the few professional organizations serve their members? The International Council of Societies of Industrial Designers (ICSID) has a presence in India, and the Society of Industrial Designers of India (SIDI) has been open to all design disciplines. Has this organization addressed design history? Has it engaged in any studies or exhibitions that acknowledge the past and its relation to the present? Are there design 'stars' implying understood criteria for excellence? What are the criteria and how have these been established?

#### CLIENTS/PATRONS

Does business and industry support design in India? From historical times, patrons were the political rulers or religious groups who had something to 'say' through architecture, wall carvings, ritual objects and manuscripts. During the Raj, the British commissioned artists to create images and texts that preserved what the former and current rulers had accomplished. In a democracy based on an early mix of socialism and capitalism, the government has become a client as well as NGOs, businesses and institutions. What have been the changes in patronage, the differences in the client/designer relationship, the changes in purposes? Where are the areas of public activity that have most benefited from graphic design? What sectors of industry have been most involved with design and designers? Are there Braun or IBM-like examples where design has been an integral part of business strategy? Are there industrial leaders who have used this model and to what effect?

#### ARCHIVES, EXHIBITIONS

To study history, the materials must be available for study. Designers and scholars can start saving contemporary materials now, but are there the collections, archives, hoardings of materials from India's past? Have the usual cultural institutions valued the stuff that we call graphic design sufficiently to collect, protect and give it space? Are the current curators open to design history and its needs? Books and manuscripts are there, but what about signboards, posters, magazines, photo documentation of wall murals, carvings, ephemeral artifacts? Around the specific industry of Bollywood there has grown a collecting consumer activity; are there other cultural areas that have spawned this level of interest? And are there conservation and exhibition programs in place? Exhibitions will teach the public to value these materials and how to interpret them and their relation to the past.

EX signage

EX coke sign

In terms of current history activities, I am aware of a large auction of Bollywood posters and ephemera about two years ago,<sup>33</sup> and more recently a design group in Bombay is engaged in funded research to preserve, at least photographically, the rich history of signage.<sup>34</sup> Tradition is not being helped by the Coca-Cola company policy of free signs for business owners who do it their way. These collections and studies, however, are positive developments.

EX LED sign

EX mobile type

I leave you with two examples representing the future: new technologies requiring new approaches to communication form. I have no grand conclusion, merely the hope that I might stimulate some discussion and activity in this very fertile area for scholarship.

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<sup>3</sup> Ramaswamy, Sumathi, ed. *Beyond Appearances?* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), page xii.

<sup>4</sup> Vyas, H. Kumar. *Design: The Indian Context*. (Ahmedabad: National Institute of Design, 2000), page 13.

<sup>5</sup> Vyas 2000, page 5.

<sup>6</sup> Vyas 2000, page 5.

<sup>7</sup> Vyas 2000, page 6.

<sup>8</sup> Vyas 2000, page 6.

<sup>9</sup> Vyas 2000, page 26.

<sup>10</sup> Vyas 2000, page 20.

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- <sup>11</sup> Vyas 2000, page 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Vyas 2000, page 11.
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