

# *Politicians, journalists and pundits use language. Graphic designers use visual language.*

*Drawing on two realms, designers unite visual and verbal content in compelling communication. In a divisive era, when words alone are not enough, can design thinking help unite citizens on the issues?*

Graphic design causes us to take notice. In an information-saturated society, messages compete for our attention. Design is the competitive advantage. Traditionally, the power of design belongs to those who commission it. Its influence is based more on the agenda of those who employ design than on the worthiness of the message it conveys. Every designed message doing its job pulls us from other messages less well designed. Design of inconsequential content diverts the public's attention from what is of consequence.

The 2008 campaign of Barack Obama brought graphic design to presidential politics. This was the first campaign to employ a sophisticated professional strategy to create a candidate's visual identity. The Obama logo and typographic framework represented a degree of sophistication associated more

with corporate and institutional branding; it was unprecedented for political office. Just as influential, an unofficial poster by a graphic designer fused the idealized image of the candidate with what was then a slogan. Through design Obama and hope became one and the same.

Most of the profession's modern history has meant adding value to content supplied by a client. The vast majority of design is applied in corporate or institutional contexts. Political campaigns have not been in the picture. Design is typically engaged with enhancing the message provided to exploit its impact on a mass audience. Graphic designers have forbears with a variety of skills, but to become a profession, design narrowed to a specialization. It is a process of mediation — between a client and an audience; between a message and the technological developments of mass dissemination; between content and human consumption. Design adds legitimacy to messages by translating them into recognizable media formats while humanizing the message itself.

Among the many roots of design, however, is self-expression. The urge to make a graphic mark — on a cave wall, on a bone fragment, on a page — is the urge to communicate. Political debate is an area where that urge has long been expressed. The political cartoon emerged from this tradition.

In America the earliest extant example of graphic design dates from 1754. It played a significant role in moving the colonies toward unification, but because it was created 168 years before Bostonian William Addison Dwiggins coined the term graphic design, it was labeled a political cartoon. Yet it bears the hallmarks of graphic design — provocative metaphoric imagery in a symbiotic relationship with a terse headline set in large type — characteristics that separate it from the cartoon tradition of caricature and caption. Attributed to Benjamin Franklin, who wrote the opinion piece it accompanies, the structure of this eighteenth century message is identical to the work of twentieth and twenty-first century designers.

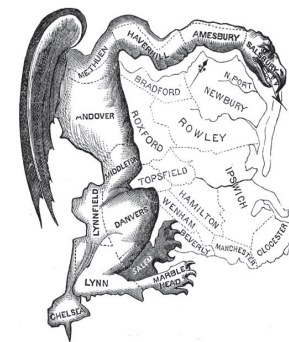
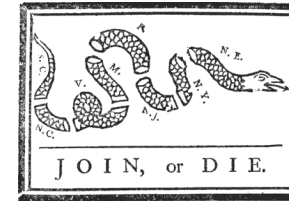
Importantly, the author of this message is its designer. Graphic design in America begins with design authorship. Franklin was not alone. A noteworthy example from 1775 by another typographer-printer, Ezekiel Russell, announces visually the casualties of Lexington and Concord. While *Join, or Die* is design that persuades, *Bloody Butchery* is design

that informs. These early examples represent the two poles of current design practice, persuasion and information — subjective and objective — with most graphic design occurring somewhere in between.

Elkanah Tisdale's 1812 *The Gerry-mander* is persuasive and informative in equal measure. Employing a cartographic foundation, Tisdale explains the abnormality of the Massachusetts voting district on which the title is based as he builds negative connotation upon the snake-like term, turning it into a mythical monster. Would we, in 2011, anticipating the process of redistricting, still refer to its abuses as gerrymandering if not for the effectiveness of this design?

Equally significant is that these designed messages are political. They embed political opinion firmly in the realm of design authorship and design authorship firmly in the lineage of graphic design. Graphic design in America begins with authorship and the authorship is political.

When digital technology transformed the twentieth century practice of design, it collapsed aspects that had been segregated and designers once again became hands-on typographers. With the keyboard replacing the drafting table designers became more word-oriented. The leap from manipulating type to manipulating words — and verbal



content — became that much shorter. Dematerializing typography from the densest of metals, paradoxically, gave it more weight in the design process. While today one would not say “more minds have been changed through lead type than lead bullets,” typography — now in the hands of designers — is nevertheless the primary medium of information and persuasion.

Visual art is the freest form of free expression. Graphic design occurs at the intersection of visual and verbal where even the verbal is expressed visually. When thoughtful designers are authors the result is expression on steroids.

*We the Designers* is a national exhibition of self-authored graphic design. Through the process of design thinking participants

inform and persuade about issues facing the Obama administration. Sometimes the verbal component is dominant; sometimes it is subordinate; and sometimes it is subsumed in symbolic imagery. Some designers tackle issues that transcend any single administration but which affect this president. Others address this administration’s policies. Still others focus on the president himself. All have one thing in common. They are the visual/verbal voice of civic engagement by we (the designers) who made them.

Designers so engaged have become known as citizen designers. Foremost among this group was Sylvia Harris. This exhibition is dedicated to her memory.

Thomas Starr  
*Exhibition Curator*  
Department of Art + Design  
Northeastern University  
August, 2011

REFRAMING  
POLITICAL ISSUES  
IN THE  
OBAMA ERA

WE THE DESIGNERS

Boston  
Northeastern University  
September 29 – December 15

2011

Washington  
National Press Club  
January 16 – February 10

2012

St. Paul  
Goldstein Museum of Design  
September 28 – December 30

2012