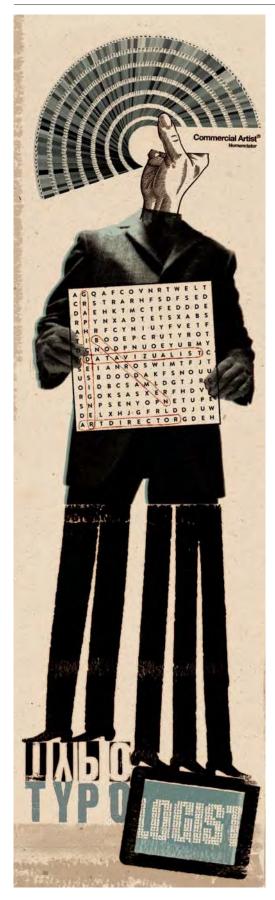## GRIDS+GUIDES/EVOLUTION

TITLE PLAY

**Explore the progression and current state of
the "graphic designer" designation.**

by Steven Heller

Are you a *graphics* designer? Your business card may say "graphic designer," but in some precincts, you're indeed a *graphics* designer—with emphasis on the "ics." For the longest time, that was the designation used in *New York Times* obituaries to describe a deceased commercial artist, layout artist, communications designer or graphic designer. It wasn't until after pressure from the design director that the "s" was removed. Nonetheless, it illustrates how the evolution of the word(s) used to describe individuals like us who manipulate type and image, communicate visual ideas or promote products visually has evolved, devolved and revolved into the entity it is today.

When the commercial craft known for type design, typographic makeup and page layout began in the early 19th century, it was ostensibly executed by printers who had their own nomenclature. Everyone was confused about what, specifically, to call the layout people on the printing staff because many were "printer's devils" (apprentices who did a little of everything). The journeymen or experienced printer "composed" the type and pages. But the evolutionarily advanced layout people weren't solely "compositors," which was a designation of craftsmen who more or less followed a layout that was sketched out by an editor, advertising agent or printing representative. These layout people did something more—let's call it "design."

The people who made roughs, comps or sketches were soon pulled from the press room and placed into the board room, where they worked at a drafting board. It was then, around the turn of the century, that the design profession began to slowly emerge from the primordial ooze. The layout people were unofficially called "boardmen" (mostly men but some women, too). The operative word around the 1890s, however, was "commercial artist." During this time, "art" was the term for any kind of pictorial material used in printing. It wasn't a value judgment, but a fact: "Let's get some art to fill the page." To distinguish high from low art—meaning gallery and museum art versus reproduction art—the word "commercial" was invoked to imply a less than noble status. It was the job of the art editor to commission art. The first reference to an art director that I found, however, was Clark Hobart for *The Burr McIntosh Monthly* (1903–10), which also had an art editor. Hobart's job was to fill the pages with lowercase art that he sketched out or designed for the compositor.

The professional terms continued to splinter throughout the early 20th century. There were book designers, poster artists (*affichistes*), advertising artists, illustrators and more. Add to that some of the foreign terms, *gebrauchsgrafiker*, *grafisch ontwerper*, etc. But on Aug 29, 1922, W.A. Dwiggins in the *Boston Evening Transcript* used the phrase "graphic designer" to describe his own work as illustrator, advertising artist, calligrapher, typographer, type designer and book designer. The term wasn't widely circulated at the time but would crop up again and again during the '30s and '40s.

Now, just as the average person has become aware of graphic design, the terminology is again in an evolutionary state. The digital revolution has reshaped the landscape, terminology and practice. Today, "commercial artist" is quaint. But "visual communicator," "visual designer," "information architect" and "content designer" seem strained. "Digital designer" and "data visualizer" are more up-to-date but unsatisfying. "Graphic designer," while not entirely satisfactory, is nonetheless comfortable.

Maybe we should take a cue from the medical profession: All doctors are doctors, but they have their specialties, too. So how about "graphic designer/typologist" or "graphic designer/data visualist"? Or maybe, in the name of keeping life simple: "graphic designer." ∎