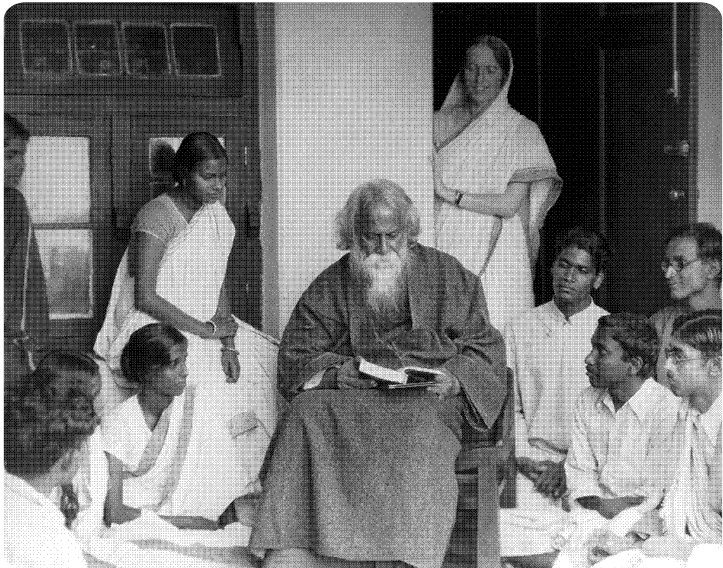


Realities and Hurdles in Design Discourse



Though supposedly an egalitarian domain, the historical and current trajectory of the graphic craft reveals a lack of true inclusivity. This is not solely attributable to an absence of general interest in the field, nor to a less-than-dedicated approach to the craft and profession of a designer, and most definitely not due to a lack of skill or creativity overall. Instead, accessibility in or to graphic design emerges as a central arbiter.

The capacity and privilege to fully engage in the craft, to utilize the tools, access the resources, as well as to commune with a community of fellow practitioners – or rather the lack thereof – stands as the ultimate determinant. Accessibility has the final say, it essentially wields authority in one’s professional realization and creative existence. Numerous variables coincide to influence this, often interweaving, interacting, and merging into a broader intersectional issue.

Ethno–Global Disparities

Generally, nationality and geographical location remain significant factors contributing to a lack of exposure to the creative discourse. While China has recently surpassed Western predominance in the exportation of various everyday design items, including apparel and toys; developed countries still hold a dominant position in the overall market for creative services, often focusing on more “higher-level” intellectual creative work. (*United Nations Conference on Trade, 2022, pp. 3–4.*)

Despite this current era of globalization and digitalization, the main origins of modern design education still bear the hallmark of Western-centrism. The foundational ideas and principles of objectively “good” and functional modern design predominantly originate from either European or American practitioners and institutions.

(Woodham, 2016, “Modernism”.)

Even to this day, nine out of the top ten rated design and art schools, as per QS World University Rankings (1), are located inside the United States or Europe, with only the Tongji University in Shanghai very recently gaining prominence by securing the 10th position in 2023. The Western world seems to have enjoyed a head start, having the chance to intricately construct an infrastructure of knowledge, institutional authority, philosophical paradigms, and subsequently, the trajectories of future careers and connections. Ultimately developing an economy that often works to the exclusion of non-Western voices. Given these conditions, one might wonder how individuals originating from non-Western Countries could ever effectively participate in these inner circles. This is especially pertinent when considering intentionally higher set tuition fees for foreign students in many countries. (*Sanchez-Serra; Marconi, 2018, pp. 13–14.*)

Similarly, within a nation, ethnic background can play a significant role. In many Western countries, design is often perceived as a predominantly “White” profession, exemplified by notable imbalances in representation. In the United States, White Americans still constitute 71,6% of the overall arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations according to the Economic Policy Institute (2). In their 2019 Design Census (3), the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) further suggests the percentage of African-Americans specifically working as graphic designers to be as low as 3%, despite making up roughly 13% of the total US population. Now this is not solely a characteristically American dilemma. According to the British Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (4) even in a cosmopolitan and culturally diverse epicenter like London, the odds of White Londoners working in the creative industries stand at one in five, twice the probability for individuals from ethnic minorities.

Evidently, we grapple with not only a Western design canon but also an explicitly ethnically White design canon – historically as well as presently. Once again, the absence of representation and the presence of historically exclusive infrastructure, having the potential to deter and demotivate people of color from participating in design disciplines, stands as a valid concern.

Women in the Labor Market

Equally for women the lack of representation in both historical and contemporary design spheres remains a major issue, along with other distinctly set hurdles. For the longest time, women were systematically denied the opportunity to pursue any occupation or craft of their choice – equally within artistic or design professions – let alone any kind of acquisition of skill sets and knowledge that did not pertain to their traditionally assigned tasks as daughters, mothers and/or housewives. Here, it is crucial to differentiate between “use value” (practical benefits of domestic tasks) and “exchange value” (done externally and relative to monetary exchange), with women having been historically involved in the former.

(Simonton, 2002. pp. 2–3.)

Their participation in the workforce was solely limited to tasks relating to the assistance of their husband’s or family’s professional ventures, such as plowing fields and producing goods. Only with the onset of the Industrial Revolution were they slowly led to be integrated into the wider workforce, a trend that especially rang true for women out of working-class backgrounds. However, this was yet again confined to roles that could contribute to the family’s financial security, such as working in the textile and clothing industry or serving as domestic help in wealthier households. A profession of choice or generally higher education and subse-

quently high-level professions were still withheld from them by the patriarchal systems that they found themselves in.

(Holloway, 2005, pp. 8–9, pp. 16–17.)

Correspondingly in the artistic professions, and art history in its entirety, women continued to be a rare presence (5). For example, despite the progressive and at times openly leftist stance of the Bauhaus, the struggle for women's equality remained twofold. On the one hand, the Bauhaus' openness to including women in their academic curriculum was considered an attitude still unusual among fellow academic institutions of that era. On the other hand, women were initially confined to certain areas of creative work, such as weaving, and discouraged from pursuits like architecture, sculpture, or painting. Due to Walter Gropius' beliefs about gender differences in cognitive abilities, the opportunities available to women were highly limited. The actual gender ratio among faculty members during the 1919 to 1925 Bauhaus-Weimar era (6) was heavily skewed towards men, despite Gropius' initial proclamation of gender equality. The Bauhaus implemented stricter enrollment policies for women, consequently leading to a decrease in female students.

Additionally, the school's policies hindered women's career advancement. The lack of apprenticeship certificates in weaving prevented them from obtaining master's diplomas and limited their professional opportunities.

Although there has been a reduction in hurdles in the academic field, with women in the United Kingdom for example constituting as much as 73% of the art schools' undergraduate and postgraduate participants *(McMillan, 2021, p. 8.)*, challenges and injustices still persist in their subsequent career fulfillment. Especially in regards to the contemporary “pantheon” of leading graphic designers and art directors, where men remain the dominant majority.

Generally speaking, women still face workplace discrimination and comparatively unjust working conditions. The AIGA 2019 Design Census (7) found that only 7% of designers were offered paid parental leave, with only 0.8% receiving childcare from their employer.

Social Dissonance

Arguably, one of the most fundamental challenges in pursuing a creative career arises from differences in social hierarchies, logically leading to pervasive financial constraints and also overall cultural divide. Classist issues often appear to co-occur with many of the other conceivable hurdles, for instance with significant portions of ethnic minorities often simultaneously being subject to the struggles of the lower socioeconomic strata (8).

This entails factors such as affording necessary tools, especially technological gadgets, having the means of pursuing higher education, as well as establishing and maintaining a viable enterprise. On top of that, it underscores a wider societal disparity of cultural capital and minimal efforts of cross-pollination of cultural experiences among the different social classes. Creative and intellectual industries as a whole continue to show clear cases of class divide and often only very small portions of individuals originating from lower class backgrounds participate in these industries (9). Additionally, researchers from the University of Manchester, the University of Edinburgh, and the University of Sheffield (10), tried to discuss the commonly held claim that cultural work is meritocratic and accessible based on talent alone, irrespective of social background. Yet their results suggested that – at least in the British context – individuals from privileged backgrounds were still dominating the cultural sec-

tor, essentially contributing to a perceived “mobility crisis” and with no positive change in the level of equality over time. Statistically, working-class individuals often did have less exposure to classical cultural events, such as theaters, operas, contemporary dance events, and art exhibitions. Instead, they seem to primarily attend simpler, more contemporary cultural activities. Higher socioeconomic classes appear to differ vastly in their cultural exposure, according to “Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries” (11), a study undertaken by British sociologists.

This has seemingly resulted in the creation of a two-class system inside the cultural sector, a phenomenon that has already been observed by French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as early as the late 1970s. In his Book “Distinction – A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste” he argues that individuals’ cultural choices are shaped by their social class and background and that these preferences serve as a way to differentiate and legitimize one’s social standing. He criticizes cultural pretentiousness and exclusive cultural habits of the intellectual upper-middle class with their “disgust at the facile”. (*Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 486.*) Bourdieu believes that cultural consumption plays a role in reinforcing existing social hierarchies and inequalities, A habit that in due course can exempt lower classes from engaging in intellectual and cultural environments, such as established art and design spheres.

“Principles of division, inextricably logical and sociological, function within and for the purposes of the struggle between social groups; in producing concepts, they produce groups, the very groups which produce the principles and the groups against which they are produced.”

– *Pierre Bourdieu*

Undoubtedly further factors could be observed in greater detail. For example, with ageism being a prominent issue in an industry typically associated with youth, where only 11.4% aged 45 and onwards (12) are working in the field. One could also delve into geographical disparities, notably the divide between rural and urban demographics (13). Urban areas largely prove to be centers of higher learning with higher amounts of creative spaces and overall higher economic development. Low-density areas lack these privileges, to the detriment of potentially equally ambitious individuals based in these areas. Furthermore, exposure to and lifelong experience with newer technology is correlated with socioeconomic and financial backgrounds. While technological fluency is a crucial asset for engaging in modern design practices, it is lacking in lower socioeconomic classes, mainly due to the high-cost constraints involved. (Du; Havard; Sansing; Yu, 2002, p. 281.) This also poses a more significant challenge for developing countries (14), where limited economic resources may restrict access to advanced technology entirely.

It seems like potential disconnections between various demographics and disciplines of art, design, and other cultural sectors, appear boundless. Yet, regardless of how multifaceted they all seem, these aspects share at least this one commonality: external factors that obstruct an individual's engagement within the disciplines of visual communication – let alone pursuing it as a serious standalone profession.