

THE GRAPHIC DESIGN COLLECTOR IN HIS LABYRINTH

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Abstract: *Graphic design collectors are key agents in recovery and preservation of graphic objects. These collectors guarantee survival for a group of fragile artefacts that can be central elements in the development and new research of Portuguese Graphic Design History. Nonetheless, they face challenges: both social, disciplinary and chronological. This article aims to express some of those difficulties, as well as try to lift the veil of a rich subject inside Graphic Design History and rehearse some answers to why the challenges may occur.*

Keywords: *graphic design history; collections; archive; Portuguese graphic design; digital age.*

Resumo: *Os coletores de design gráfico são agentes-chave na recuperação e na preservação de objetos gráficos. Estes colecionadores garantem a sobrevivência de um grupo de artefactos frágeis que podem ser elementos centrais no desenvolvimento e na nova investigação da História do Design Gráfico Português. No entanto, enfrentam desafios: tanto sociais como disciplinares e cronológicos. Este artigo pretende expressar algumas dessas dificuldades, bem como tentar levantar o véu de um tema rico dentro da História do Design Gráfico e ensaiar algumas respostas às razões pelas quais os desafios podem ocorrer.*

Palavras-chave: *história do design gráfico; coleções; arquivo; design gráfico português; era digital.*

Graphic Design History is a recent subject. In some ways we cannot even name it a *subject* because, as consequence of its many challenges, it was never able to create a strong and collective body of knowledge¹. This was not by flaw but by circumstance: since the 1960s Graphic Design, specifically in Portugal, was viewed as a *disciplinary field*, and disciplinary fields are not subjects but rather areas of exchange between them, with not define borders².

It is relevant to ask if there is a need, in this era, to define those borders, or if we should be embracing its flow as disciplinary field. Should we pursue the creation of a Great History of Portuguese Graphic Design? Or is it unnecessary, if not outdated, to do so? In any case this discussion is one exclusive to graphic designers, it is a closed process of discourse and response. Much like what happens to graphic design objects.

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¹ BLAUVELT, 2014 [1994]: 77.

² António Sena da Silva, 1994 interview for «Expresso» newspaper, cited by BÁRTOLO, 2006.

Pedro Piedade Marques³ names this an *endogamic process*, and explains:

most times it is an older student of a designer [that would have kept its graphic estate]. For example, if you would want to see pieces and sketches of Câmara Leme you would have to speak with [Henrique] Cayatte. [...] It is still a very endogamic process, like many things in Portugal, everything stays in the same place. Now, you try to explain someone from the outside [...] why [...] in the middle of tons of paper you pick that poster, why don't you pick the little bronze piece, why do you choose that piece of paper with 40 or 50 years old, with traces of bugs? What is its value? That is very hard to explain.

In Portuguese Graphic Design, the rescue process and the memory itself is kept in a small circle of professionals, families, friends and some collectors, by inheritance or gift, rarely being exhibited, shown to an audience or made public to the eyes and pockets of general collectors. It was this restrict access, we suppose, that allowed some of them to survive the lack of public interest, but it is also that which oblige graphic design collectors to pursue heirs and families to find design estates.

This pursuit is difficult. Not only because all families have their problems, but also because many Portuguese Graphic Designers saw it as a minor craft to pay bills and history was not very kind. Pedro Piedade Marques⁴ blames the lack of visual literacy for that disappearance — we let them disappear. Even designers whose work and memory is kept by others who met them and can be revived by oral recording, the lack of archive, of objects, to support it can be an obstacle to research. He gives the example of Sérgio Guimarães, designer, among other things, of a well-known poster of the Carnation Revolution:

Sérgio Guimarães, who is mostly known for having made that poster [...] of the child that puts carnations in a G3: you can't find anything about him. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Completely made dust in history. You find some books he published, some legends, some stories. I was trying to make a book about him. It's very complicated. People remember, they tell you some jokes, people with seventy years old or more. Getting information on him is possible through his former partner of many years, Lia Gama, but it's scattered information. It is very hard to build a Sérgio Guimarães collection. You gather some things, but sorting them out and getting information about the objects is a hard task.

³ Interviewed and cited by SILVA, 2017: 54.

⁴ SILVA, 2017: 56.

It is a prolonged lack of visual literacy, originated in the presentness condition Andrew Blauvelt⁵ presented. Its results, a deficit of design objects market and dispersion of existent artefacts. Nonetheless, there is an optimistic approach that these objects are somewhere waiting to be awoken.

In the last five years there was unprecedented development in Portuguese Graphic Design History, built with its own methodology and vocabulary⁶, as well as a growing interest in recover, select and preserve graphic design heritage and its actors⁷. This recent development, though, brings its own challenges: the hunt for artefacts, most of them of paper and so quite fragile, is not easy because graphic design objects have a sense of *presentness*⁸ which implies they intimately belong to their own time and hinder any historical sensibility around them. Who would feel tempted to keep an envelope of an electric bill, even though it has a logo that ten years from now may not exist? A collector might have been.

Collectors are key to the survival of objects. They are the most passionate people in this Earth⁹. Collectors of books, newspapers, magazines, posters, packages, labels, wrapping paper, prints, erasers, boxes, frames, illustration, stickers, pins, brochures, matrixes, sketches, photography's, notebooks. Some are more publicly active, others keep their collection strictly private, but in almost every graphic design collection we can find unique objects that help, or can help, to enrich graphic design history and to preserve its collective memory.

When we speak about preservation of collective memory, we mean not only the rescue of past artefacts but also the record and systematisation of present ones. The second one makes the first one easier, long term.

Many times, the graphic design collector is everything at once: practicing designer, professor, collector, researcher, curator, editor. Because collecting demands a skill to select and evaluate the collector aims to become a specialist in its subject. Like so, he will have a will to develop knowledge about his collection, by means thinking, researching or writing, especially when the subject has some public interest. In graphic design, the consequences of this specialisation can be presentations, books and exhibitions.

The activeness of graphic design collectors and the fact that some of them are practicing designers don't mean they are more careful with their own personal archives neither that their collections span to present time. In the research *Privado/Público: colecionadores de design gráfico português*¹⁰ six case studies were presented, all of them

⁵ BLAUVELT, 2014 [1994].

⁶ BÁRTOLO, 2012: 73.

⁷ QUINTELA, 2013.

⁸ BLAUVELT, 2014 [1994]: 78.

⁹ BALZAC, 1847, cited by SILVA, 2012.

¹⁰ SILVA, 2017.

graphic design collectors. Although some apply the same organisational (and almost obsessive) spirit to their own work archives¹¹, others don't treat their own work as necessary to a bigger and more complete archive of Graphic Design History; also, it is relevant to consider that most collections are nostalgic and their focus is rarely on more recent objects. The question that poses is, then, who is collecting the present?

One could think that in the Information Era it should be easier to keep track of graphic objects being created, and even easier to widespread images and references of Portuguese design, however, for them to appear online there must be someone uploading them. In this sense, after the advent of blogs, when things looked more promising, the advent of social networks arrived. It is impossible to create archive in social networks — they are closed, hermetic and populous websites, and, without a search engine, our information, most times, will be confined to a personal network.

Adding to that, the mainstream of digital brings a scarcity of print graphics, not only because there are new audiences and new needs we are creating for, but for budget reasons (punk no longer means printed posters in the street, there is a new low-cost in town).

In a more and more dematerialised world, it is wise to think what the future of graphic design collectors is as we know them. They seem to be dependent on the production of printed objects, so it looks paradoxical that there is a concern with diminishing graphic collectibles at the same time there are much more designers than ever.

As shelves of objects transform themselves into lists of folders, how does the concept of collection survive in the digital world? For sure there will always be collections, groups of things someone gather and relates emotionally to. We like objects, especially those that are symbols to our knowledge, and have a natural tendency to amass them.

Certain types of collections already face extinction, like philately or numismatic. Collections that previously had the alibi of spreading culture, a way of reaching the world, are now obsolete¹². How many new collectors of coins do you know?

It is plausible that graphic design collectors will only collect graphic material until the 2000s, or that prints of this millennia will become rarer and so valuable, but how do the collections are going to adapt to digital design? A large part of present graphic design production is in the web, is it condemned to vanish as soon as it is posted? How can we adapt our concept of memory preservation, of collection and archive, so it can survive the challenges of the digital age?

¹¹ Like designer Antero Ferreira, studied in SILVA, 2017.

¹² Jorge Silva, interviewed and cited by SILVA, 2017: 145.

Portuguese Graphic Design History and its collectors are starting to gain momentum in the age of the web, risking a race against time. It would be expected that we were looking for solutions for the present and creating mechanisms that guaranteed survival of the archive and recorded the present, however the collective will seem to be stuck in an old idea, more ambitious, to solidify History and its icons. We already know we can't build it like we were in the 20th century, and we know that web, the fluidity of the graphic designer today (who is also a producer, a critic, a curator, a teacher, a collector) and the needs of the 21th century have a tremendous weight over our fragile subject. We know we don't have the body of knowledge of the History of Art neither the professional recognition of Architecture, but we persist, try to collaborate and seem to be closer. We also know that there were past attempts but they left fragile foundations. Will this be it?

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