

Book Review

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World history of design

Victor Margolin. 2015

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Epic, herculean, encyclopaedic, definitive, ambitious, big, exhaustive, comprehensive, holistic, inclusive, eclectic, busting the Western-centric canon, world scale, definitive, analytical, deeply exploratory, overwhelming and immersive. These are some of the adjectives and descriptors that reviewers have used to describe Victor Margolin's first two of a three-volume tome, *World history of design*, published in 2015. (The third volume is still under development.)

My personal adjectives for describing this monumental work are 'immersive' and 'encyclopaedic' since these two terms encapsulate how it engaged me in a highly informative and thought-provoking reading experience for a solid three weeks – therefore the reference to 'immersive'. The tone, structure and volume of content is 'encyclopaedic', in all of its interpretations. *World history of design* is daunting in length, but it is an easy read because the tone of writing is uncomplicated and unpretentious, and the vast amount of information is chunked into easily consumable slices and structured in a logical sequence, which allows one to easily pick up and put down the book any time, and to navigate the daunting page counts. I can also add 'surprising' and 'dramatic' as additional adjectives because much of the content deals with new or little known, but important, design history from previously marginalised regions from around the world that have not been included in seminal design history books.

The first two volumes of *World history of design* aim to document the world's history of design spanning several million years (Figure 1), but in Margolin's own words, 'Let's make it shorter ... roughly forty thousand years' (Bruinsma 2015). Volume 1 includes



FIGURE N° 1



Covers of *World history of design*, Vol 1 & 2. © Bloomsbury Academic.

two lengthy introductions (one general and one volume-specific) and 19 chapters (Figures 2a-d), spanning from prehistoric times to World War I. Volume 2 consists of a lengthy volume-specific introduction and 18 chapters covering design history up to World War II. All of this is distilled into 750 pages, which are richly illustrated by more than 1 000 images (see plates). Volume 3 (publishing date unknown) will cover post-World War II to the present. All chapters conclude with detailed bibliographies, which provide useful resources for research and further reading.

Margolin (2015:13) explains why he went back as far as prehistoric times in writing what he calls 'this epic history':

The earliest actors in this saga of design history are not even human. They belong to a species known as *Homo habilis*, whom paleontologists believe were the first toolmakers. There is clear continuity between the implements they devised and the first human tools. It is also likely that the sounds and gestures they used to communicate formed some sort of linguistic communication that formed the basis of human language ...

And so, Margolin (2015:13) provides a dramatic prologue that unfolds over several

Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments xviii
General Introduction 1
Introduction to Volume 1 13

1 PP. 17–25 The Prehistoric Age 7000 BCE–900 BCE	2 PP. 27–46 The Earliest Civilizations 7000 BCE–900 BCE	3 PP. 47–59 The Classical Age and Early Byzantium 900 BCE–800 CE
4 PP. 61–79 Medieval Europe and the Islamic World 800–1200	5 PP. 81–99 Asia, Africa, and the Americas 800 BCE–1200 CE	6 PP. 101–142 Renaissance Europe and the Ottoman Empire 1200–1750
7 PP. 143–170 Cross-Cultural Encounters 1200–1750	8 PP. 171–205 The Industrial Revolution in Europe and America 1750–1830	9 PP. 207–225 The Age of Exhibitions: Great Britain 1830–1900

FIGURE N° 2a



Contents pages of *World history of design*, Vol 1. © Bloomsbury Academic.

Contents

10 PP. 227–257 The Craft Ideal and the Art Movement: Britain and Elsewhere 1861–1915	11 PP. 259–288 The Age of Exhibitions: Europe Outside Great Britain 1830–1900	12 PP. 289–336 Art Nouveau and the Decorative Impulse 1890–1914
13 PP. 337–396 The United States 1840–1900	14 PP. 397–428 Canada, Australia, and New Zealand 1300–1900	15 PP. 429–457 Protoindustrialization in Diverse Regions 1750–1900
16 PP. 459–480 Colonies and Pre-industrial Nations in Asia and Africa 1750–1900	17 PP. 481–533 Modern Design in Europe and America 1900–1917	18 PP. 535–561 Art and Literature of the Avant-Gardes 1897–1918
19 PP. 563–571 World War I 1914–1918	Index 573	

FIGURE N° 2b



Contents pages of *World history of design*, Vol 1. © Bloomsbury Academic.

Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments xx
Introduction to Volume 2 1

20

PP. 5–32

Design in the Soviet Union

1905–1928

21

PP. 33–72

Weimar Germany

1918–1933

22

PP. 73–105

France

1918–1939

23

PP. 107–139

Great Britain

1918–1939

24

PP. 141–203

Western and Southern Europe

1900–1939

25

PP. 205–268

Central and Eastern Europe

1900–1939

26

PP. 269–297

Scandinavia

1917–1945

27

PP. 299–363

Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union, and
Portugal

1922–1940

28

PP. 365–459

The United States

1917–1941

FIGURE **Nº 2c**



Contents pages of *World history of design*, Vol 2. © Bloomsbury Academic.

Contents

29

PP. 461–515

Latin America: Cuba, Mexico, and Brazil

1900–1939

30

PP. 517–553

Latin America: Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, and Uruguay

1900–1939

31

PP. 555–613

Commonwealth Countries: Canada, Australia, and New Zealand

1900–1939

32

PP. 615–686

The Near and Middle East

1900–1939

33

PP. 687–727

Colonies: Africa

1900–1945

34

PP. 729–753

Colonies: India, Hong Kong, and Burma

1900–1945

35

PP. 755–782

Asia: China and Siam

1900–1939

36

PP. 783–831

Asia: Japan, its Colonies, and its Territories

1900–1937

37

PP. 833–915

World War II

1939–1945

Index 917

FIGURE **N° 2d**



Contents pages of *World history of design*, Vol 2. © Bloomsbury Academic.

hundreds of pages. He continues:

There is good reason to begin a world history of design with pre-human toolmaking and then to initiate the trajectory of human communication with the first cave paintings and rock art. Doing so demonstrates that design, even in its most frivolous contemporary forms, has deep roots in human culture and must therefore be taken as seriously as we take the study of other forms of any human activity. Adopting such an early starting point also makes clear that design is part of an evolution process ...

By ending and starting with the two World Wars, Margolin also acknowledges the role that design has played in geopolitics and society and its precarious position in the survival and decline of humanity, which is elucidated below in this review.

In the General Introduction to *Volume 1*, Margolin (2015:1) states:

Design in its broadest sense continues to evolve as an activity whose value is steadily achieving greater recognition. It is therefore important to tell its story as broadly as possible and to explain how that story has changed over the centuries. Central to the story is an account of the ways different strands of technical, artistic, commercial, and social practice have led to our current understanding of design and how we are likely to understand it in future. This brings us to a particular problem: how does one write the history of a subject whose boundaries are indeterminate and whose subject matter has already been partially claimed by other disciplines?

He goes on to mention a few of these 'other' fields of historical research such as archaeology (early tools), art history (cave paintings and rock art), linguistics (writing and sign systems), craft (handicraft) and technology (devices and machines). He then asks: '... what is left for the design historian to write about, especially in the lengthy period before design becomes identified as a pronounced practice in the late 18th century?' He answers: 'If the story were told, however, design history has always been a hybrid with subject matter taken from other historical disciplines ...' He concludes that design history writing is an interdisciplinary practice and that the design historian's role is to '... make use of subject matter and techniques from other histories ... to contribute to coherent purposeful new narratives'. And that is exactly what this tome does.

What Margolin achieves in particular is to expand the design history canon beyond the traditional Westernised focus that has dominated it by being truly multi-disciplinary and geographically inclusive and therefore contributing 'purposeful new narratives'. *World history of design* covers a diversity of design disciplines; incorporates material

and non-material history of design practice and profession history; and includes a great diversity of narratives and a plethora of images sourced from all over the world, which are not often seen in design history books.

I found it particularly refreshing that Margolin (2015:1) manages to not elevate anything (or any region) as being more important than another, and the traditional canonical figures and institutions do not dominate the narratives. Previously marginalised designers (particularly those of colour) and regions are seamlessly interwoven with the traditional canonical narratives, and therefore provide a new, inclusive and balanced world design history.

World history of design also addresses other critical issues such as the definition of design, how it operates in different parts of the world and what role it played in society at different points in time. Margolin (2015:1) explains: 'I have ... emphasized in this history the objects, systems, and services that have been integral to the purpose of human action.'

In creating his narrative, Margolin throws the net wide and includes industrial, graphic and interior design, furniture, homeware, fashion, jewellery, architecture, engineering and craft (to name just a few). In doing so, he further shows the interdependence of disciplines and its diverse roles in society. But, his tome does not end with design and he seamlessly integrates other scholarly disciplines.

Margolin defines the premise of *World history of design* in the General Introduction of *Volume 1* by asking: what is design? He interrogates the rhetorical debates regarding this short but complex question and establishes his own loosely defined parameters for selecting content for this tome as a means to look at design history from a 'new/different' perspective. For him, design is how we organise daily life and how it helps us communicate clearly.

Another interesting dimension is that Margolin also looks at the development of the design profession and the vision of its evolution – not just styles and aesthetic design movements – which enabled him to write a 'different/new' multi-layered and multi-dimensional history of design.

Margolin (2015:3) further believes that design is also a discursive practice – a complex and inclusive vision of the world. He expands upon the traditional design history discourse and also engages on a massive scale with socio-, political, geographic, anthropological, cultural and economic discourses. This is not new, but the scale of his interrogation is certainly new, and these aspects make this tome important since it provides new guises for viewing the world's history of

design. In essence, *World history of design* challenges design history scholars (and designers) to rethink their interpretation of what design is and how it has contributed to human history in general – good and bad.

In two different interviews with Max Bruinsma (2015) and Steven Heller (2015) about the writing of *World history of design*, Margolin talks about two kinds of design: Design with a big and small 'D'. Design with a 'big D' describes the official practice of the profession starting with the Industrial Revolution and mass production and mass communication. As an opposite (or rather more inclusionary), Margolin explains that design with a 'small d' is what people have been doing since the beginning of time to meet their needs for living. He says: 'There has always been design and we are a designing species. We have been put on earth with the obligation to design our way forward' (Bruinsma 2015).

Margolin further refers to the culture of production and 'how we live and how we might live' – material and immaterial (Bruinsma 2015). He sees design as a form of cultural expression and social activity as opposed to it just being related to manufacturing and technology. Margolin says it is all design and he highlights the concepts of 'equitable and just – utopian and pragmatic'. He further adds that ethics and values are other critical dimensions of design that are dialectic because they relate to designing interactions. For him, design is inherently social and socially needed and it is therefore 'a language of ways of living to build a "good society"' (Bruinsma 2015).

In this context, Margolin interrogates the roles of geography, politics and economics as an axis for writing *World history of design* and it is this focus that makes this volume so interesting and different from other design history accounts.

Margolin (2015:7) states: 'Geography is central to the design history narrative, first as the designation of locations where design occurs but later as an account of the aggregates of political entities such as nations that form in those places. It is also immersed in the economic systems that arise within these groupings and make production and trade possible.' It is therefore refreshing and fascinating to read about how design was practiced and how it converged, collided, colluded and evolved with politics, social, culture and trade history in diverse places ranging from the well-documented design histories of Europe, North America and Japan, to the largely marginalised (by design historians) regions of Latin America, Africa, South, West and East Asia and Australasia.

In the conclusion for the General Introduction to *Volume 1*, Margolin (2015:11) states:

History is the repository of our collective experience. It chronicles the

best and the worst of what we have achieved as a species. We need to be cognizant of both in order to create standards for our present and future actions. The history of design thus provides the markers for anyone who wants to understand the consequences and potential of design practice in its multifarious forms. Such understanding becomes essential in proportion to the growing influence of design in all of our lives.

While reviewing the first two volumes of *World history of design*, I found it equally interesting to explore Margolin's research and writing process. Therefore I found a video produced by Myra Margolin (2015) which elucidates many of his views and approaches in compiling this decades long research project. View the fascinating video, *The process of writing World History of Design*, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kxyy0THLful

In conclusion, one also needs to look at the drawbacks/negatives of this groundbreaking publication. Firstly, most images are not reproduced in colour but the reasons for that are perfectly understandable – production costs. Secondly, the listed price is US\$695 which surely makes it unaffordable for most designers and students.

World history of design is a 'must have' reference in any library – personal or academic – since it caters for a broad audience that spans design historians, design scholars, students of design and those who are design curious.



PLATE **N° 1**



Paleolithic cave painting of an auroch, Lascaux, France. © Hemis/Alamy.



PLATE **N° 2**



Antonio Sinibaldi and Gherardo di Giovanni del Fora, Medici Psalter, title page and miniature of King David in prayer, c. 1490. University of Cambridge.



PLATE **N° 3**



Fernand Léger, *La fin du monde filmée par l'ange de Notre Dame*, page spread. 1919. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2014.

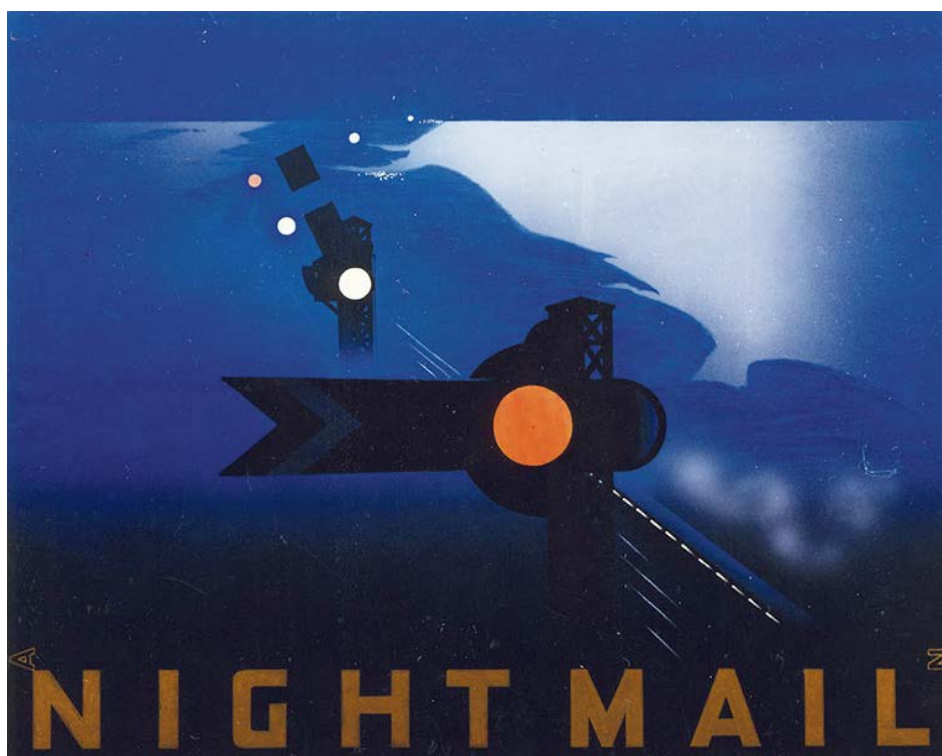


PLATE **N° 4**



Pat Keely, *Night Mail* poster, 1939. © Royal Mail Group 2013.

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