

# Working Papers on Design

© University of Hertfordshire. To cite this journal article:  
Lees-Maffei, Grace (2010) 'Introduction – Writing Design: Words, Myths, Practices', *Working Papers on Design*, 4, ed. Grace Lees-Maffei, Retrieved <date> from <[http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research/papers/wpdesign/index.html](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpdesign/index.html)>

---



## Introduction - Writing Design: Words, Myths, Practices

Dr Grace Lees-Maffei

University of Hertfordshire

The six articles presented in this fourth volume of *Working Papers on Design (WPoD)* are the result of a long process of collaboration. They were initially offered as abstracts in response to a call for papers published in 2008 for the Design History Society annual conference, *Writing Design: Object, Process, Discourse, Translation*, which I convened, with Jessica Kelly (Middlesex University) in September 2009. Following double-blind peer-review, successful authors prepared their papers for advanced circulation. At the conference, presenters received responses from invited panel chairs and respondents. After the conference, delegates were invited to develop their papers as articles for another round of double-blind peer review, which took place at the beginning of 2010. The work showcased in this volume of *WPoD* has thus been developed over two years, from abstract to conference paper to article, with the benefit of formal and informal feedback at each stage. This volume of *WPoD* should, therefore, give a good taste of the work presented at the *Writing Design: Object, Process, Discourse, Translation* conference, as well as fulfilling the more ambitious aim of providing a series of case studies through which to consider the role of writing, variously defined, in understanding design.

The articles presented here are arranged in a loose chronology, and according to three focal points: words, myths and practices. They might have been arranged differently, of course. The object lifecycle might have been used as an organising principle with, for example, Lima, Biggs and Büchler's article on the sketch, beginning, rather than ending, the volume and the articles on words and myths following those focused on practice, echoing the way in which discourse responds to, as well as forms, practice. However, the structure employed here has been chosen to emphasize three distinct concerns that can be discerned within the Writing Design thematic area of interest.

### I - Words

The opening pair of articles interprets the invitation of *Writing Design*, to consider the interplay of objects, processes, discourses and translations, in terms of detailed etymological examination of the keywords, *disegno* and *design*. First, we see Raymond Quek's far-reaching 'Excellence in Execution: *Disegno* and the parallel of eloquence' which spans the later Middle Ages and Renaissance Europe to examine the etymology of the difficult word '*Disegno*'



as a problematic precursor for today's understanding of the word 'design', and the Renaissance notion of eloquence in drawing. Quek considers architectural drawings, goldsmithing, anatomy and figure drawing among his examples. This article contributes a much-needed reassessment of the Renaissance as an early period of the history of design. Next, a related article by Eduardo Côrte-Real, 'The Word "Design": Early Modern English Dictionaries and Literature on Design, 1604 – 1837', considers the history of the word 'design' from the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century using dictionaries and literary sources to trace changes in its meaning and that of related words. Corte-Real sets out, in addition, to challenge the existing chronology of design history, and its conventional period of study, by examining the 'pre-history' of design, in etymological terms. A wide range of primary sources are employed in piecing together this much-needed and compellingly original history which tackles the *Writing Design* theme head-on. Taken together, these two articles offer a useful and substantial foundation for the remaining articles showcased in this volume of *WPD*.

## II - Myths

The second group of articles are focussed on the use of textual sources in the writing of design history. They show how close analysis of certain textual sources can be used to interrogate the myths which have built up around specific designed objects, either as a result of a lack of recourse to authoritative sources, or on the basis of more questionable source material. Ciara Murray's 'Brother Armstrong and the Freemasons: Belleek's Masonic Tableware' demonstrates the value of a focus on the relationships between design and 'writing', by considering the myths which have obscured the history of the Belleek pottery. Murray notes that the decontextualising of Belleek tableware enabled its isolation and the fabrication of new and inaccurate myths about the authenticity of the objects. While Murray's aim is to test the myths surrounding Belleek pottery with a study of its business practices, and archival and primary sources, her close reading of Masonic symbols can also be interpreted, within the context of this volume, as a study of a particularly coded kind of writing.

Another symbol forms the focus for Juliet Ash's article 'The Untruthful Source: Prisoners' writings, official and reform documentation, 1900-1930': the broad arrow applied to prison clothing in England. Here, Ash provides a detailed comparison of the different sentiments, modes of expression and veracity of prison and government reports, reform materials and prisoner's memoirs, noting, for example, that the former group of writings has a preference for quantifiable data and the latter is prone to an exaggeration consistent with the communication of strongly-felt subjective experience. Ash and Murray each demonstrate the historical value of comparing a range of competing voices through diverse textual source material in order to get nearer to an elusive truth obscured by myth and stereotype.



While Murray and Ash use a range of textual sources to question existing myths and assumptions, Monica Penick's 'Marketing Modernism: *House Beautiful* and the Station Wagon Way of Life', provides a cultural biography of a myth – the Station Wagon Way of Life – articulated through a specific magazine article. Penick shows how certain objects, from the titular station wagon itself to a range of furniture designed by Paul Frankl, were tied in to a highly particularised American lifestyle with 'nationalistic overtones'. Such objects were, Penick tells us, 'highly-politicized weapons in an attack not only against the International Style and its practitioners (including architects Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius), but against communism, socialism, and any form of non-democratic, non-capitalistic government, economic system or culture.' In this way, a magazine – indeed, a magazine article - is shown have as its aim nothing less than the shaping of social and cultural values.

### III - Practices

The final pair of articles emphasises practitioner and practice. In 'Amateurs: hobby histories of the Australian press', Jesse O'Neill shows how, in the printing museum, 'The idea in history of *res gestae* (things done) is understood literally, and therefore re-enacted literally.' Here, the 'Amateurs' of history writing, and of printing, write books of printing history and run small museums of printing which enable hands-on experiences for their visitors, who mainly hail from the graphic design profession. O'Neill's article points to the development of a different, professionalised, printing history for Australia.

One meaning of the word 'design' is 'a preliminary sketch for a picture or other work of art; the plan of a building or any part of it...' (OED 2010). In the last article, 'The Value of Architectural Sketches', Ana Gabriela Godinho Lima, Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler complete the circle of this volume of *WPoD* with their exploration of the status attributed to architectural sketches. The authors' interest lies in the consumption of sketches, rather than the nature of sketches themselves. Lima *et al* consider the sketch as speaking volumes about the process through which it comes into being (from an extended architectural training, in the service of architectural practice) and the context in which it is consumed, so that each sketch affirms of its creator 'I am an architect' and 'this is architecture'.

Interpreted in this way, Lima *et al*'s article shows us something of the wordless, unspoken, narratives that design, as process and as product, can communicate.

### Writing Design

Taken together, the articles in this volume of *WPoD* demonstrate the richness and value of the theme Writing Design, inviting reflexive scholarship on writing *about* design, writing which brings design into being, semantically, and design as a kind of writing or as a replacement for writing. This volume is one of several outputs developed



from the 2009 conference *Writing Design: Object, Process, Discourse, Translation*. Sixteen papers presented there have been developed as chapters of a book, *Writing Design: Words and Objects* (Lees-Maffei 2011). It is intended that this volume of *WPoD* and the book will complement one another. Other papers presented at the *Writing Design* conference have been published elsewhere (Dobraszczyk *et al* 2010; Fineder and Geisler 2010; Ryan 2009; Dalla Mura 2009; Kulič 2010; Webb 2010; Molloy 2010). This volume of *WPoD*, the forthcoming *Writing Design: Words and Objects* book, and the 2009 conference from which they are both developed, all form part of the ongoing Writing Design research project, hosted by the tVAD Research Group in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Hertfordshire. tVAD produces scholarship which examines relationships between text, narrative and image. The Writing Design research project aims to provide high quality scholarly outputs which further understanding of the discourses surrounding design; outputs include *The Design History Reader*, (Lees-Maffei and Houze 2010) and 'The Production-Consumption-Mediation Paradigm' (Lees-Maffei 2009). More information about the [Writing Design](#) research project is available at the tVAD website, which will be refreshed in 2011. It is planned that the Writing Design research project will continue as a collaborative forum for thinking about the relationship between words and things.

In closing this introduction, I extend my thanks firstly to the authors of these articles who have responded with patience, courtesy and timeliness, to a succession of editorial demands, making my job as editor much more enjoyable than it might otherwise have been. I also sincerely thank the peer reviewers who contributed to the quality of this volume. Those who were directly involved in the peer review of articles are listed on the editorial page of *Working Papers on Design* website. However, there are many other referees who contributed to the conference, as well as panel chairs and respondents; it is hoped that their contribution will be registered in the refreshed website planned for 2011.

## References

- Dalla Mura, Maddalena. 2009. "Re: Focus Design Display - Design in Museums: Towards an Integrative Approach: The Potential of Science and Technology Museums." *The Journal of Design History*, 22 (3): 259 - 270.
- Dobraszczyk, Paul, Michael Esbester and Paul Stiff. 2010. "Designing and gathering information: perspectives on nineteenth-century forms." In Toni Weller (ed.) *Information History in the Modern World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fineder, Martina and Thomas Geisler. 2010. "Design Criticism and Critical Design in the Writings of Victor Papanek (1923–1998)." *The Journal of Design History*, 23 (1): 99 - 106.
- Kulič, Vladimir. 2010. "Architecture and the Politics of Reading: Nikola Dobrovic and the Generalstab Building in Belgrade." In Leslie Atzmon (ed.) *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press.



Lees-Maffei, Grace. 2009. "The Production-Consumption-Mediation Paradigm." *The Journal of Design History*, 22 (4): 351-376.

Lees-Maffei, Grace (ed.) 2011. *Writing Design: Words and Objects*. Oxford: Berg.

Lees-Maffei, Grace and Rebecca Houze (eds.) 2010. *The Design History Reader*. Oxford: Berg.

Molloy, Ryan. 2010. "Iced Up' and 'Platinum Plus': The Development of Hip-Hop Typographic Ornaments." In Leslie Atzmon (ed.) *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press.

OED Online. "design, n." November 2010. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/50840?rskey=UAKxoC&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed December 14, 2010).

Ryan, Nicky. 2009. "Millstone or milestone? The perceived value of cultural studies for art and design students and teachers." *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 8 (1): 9–25.

Webb, Jane. 2010. "The Essential Outline: John Flaxman and Neoplatonism in Early Nineteenth-Century Manufactures." In Leslie Atzmon (ed.) *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press.

Writing Design research project website [http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research/tvad/writingdesign.html](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/tvad/writingdesign.html)  
(accessed December 14, 2010)

Writing Design: Object, Process, Discourse, Translation conference website  
[http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research/tvad/event030909.html](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/tvad/event030909.html) (accessed December 14, 2010).

## Contact

Dr Grace Lees-Maffei  
Reader in Design History  
University of Hertfordshire  
School of Creative Arts  
College Lane  
Hatfield  
Hertfordshire AL10 9AB  
[g.lees-maffei@herts.ac.uk](mailto:g.lees-maffei@herts.ac.uk)