The Origins of Graphic Design in America, 1870-1920

By Ellen Mazur Thomson

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By the time the phrase "graphic design" first appeared in print in 1922, design professionals in America had already created a discipline combining visual art with mass communication. In this book, Ellen Mazur Thomson examines for the first time the early development of the graphic design profession. It has been thought that graphic design emerged as a profession only when European modernism arrived in America in the 1930s, yet Thomson shows that the practice of graphic design began much earlier. Shortly after the Civil War, when the mechanization of printing and reproduction technology transformed mass communication, new design practices emerged. Thomson investigates the development of these practices from 1870 to 1920, a time when designers came to recognize common interests and create for themselves a professional identity.

What did the earliest designers do, and how did they learn to do it? What did they call themselves? How did they organize them-selves and their work? Drawing on an array of original period documents, the author explores design activities in the printing, type founding, advertising, and publishing industries, setting the early history of graphic design in the context of American social history.

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Ellen Mazur Thomson is an independent scholar.

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