

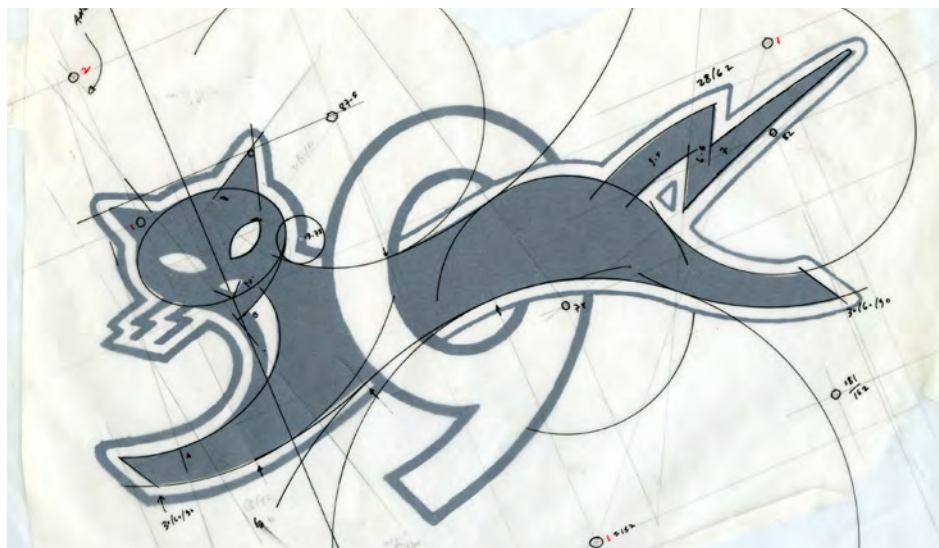


INTERVIEWS

Craft in action: the case for graphic designers to start with analog methods

by Allyson Marrs

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Mark Fox's Eveready cat inking.

Continuing a series focused on industry craft, Fine content manager Allyson Marrs speaks with designer and educator Mark Fox about craft's intrinsic integrity and impact on society's culture.

Mark Fox's iconography, trademarks and custom typography have visually defined companies, making brands like Major League Soccer, Nike, PowerBar, Random House, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Warner Bros. Records and Wired recognizable by design. He worked for decades under the guise [BlackDog](#) and has been collaborating with his partner Angie Wang at [Design is Play](#) for the last 10 years. Their work is honored and displayed in museums internationally.

A professor of graphic design at California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco, he's also co-authored [Symbols: A Handbook for Seeing](#) with Angie. Here Mark discusses the intersection of consumers' increasing demands for craft, and makers' genuine expression of it.

Allyson: How do you define craft? And do you think the definition is best determined by creators or consumers?

Mark: In truth, the most perceptive judge of a particular craft is one who practices it with a degree of mastery. If a consumer thinks something is well-crafted when it is not, either the consumer is uninformed or has been deceived. Neither scenario is optimal.

Craft encompasses both hand skill and a kind of fluid intelligence—the hand responding to the physical world as it “makes,” and the eye weighing that response. This understanding of craft is also tied to analog methods of making. Angie’s and my work as graphic designers and educators is fueled by the belief that design can serve as a forum for individual creative expression—and that this expression is most authentic when its genesis is analog. As a result, most of our studio work and teaching is grounded in handcraft. We find analog methods of making to be both broadening and humanizing, and capable of yielding work of distinction unbowed by the constraints of software and screen.

In what ways does craft then inform your approach or way of thinking through a project?

I place great emphasis on not letting software dictate my approach. As a result, my design process nearly always starts with my sketching on paper. I continue to iterate and refine by hand, typically hand-inking my work with a Rapidograph inking pen on vellum.

The process of drawing and reworking the drawing is a process of testing: testing the concept, yes, but also visually testing the forms, line weights and the relationships between positive and negative spaces. Design is a dialog between seeing, thinking and making.

If authenticity is the goal behind the expression of craft, is honesty implied in the definition of craft?

Yes. To be honest is to be genuine, real and marked by integrity. Brands that crib the earmarks of craft without actually devoting the time and the expense to produce goods that are well-crafted are inauthentic.

For example, in the context of type, there is a trend to make it appear that the work is hand-lettered, or to make it look distressed. If you look closely at it, however, you will notice that every letter “a” is the same. This is a marker of digital cloning, that someone is trying to conjure the idea of individuality without

working in an individual way. Conversely, if you start with analog type and blow it up, it tends to reveal some natural variation within the letterforms—some residue of a material process.

The American Arts and Crafts furniture maker Gustav Stickley believed that, by exposing the grain of the wood and the method of construction, his furniture was honest, and that this would have an enlightening effect on the user. As a result, the earliest known advertisement for Stickley's furniture was headlined "Furniture As An Educator."

A fraudulent mindset leads to products that dull the senses rather than sharpen them. Deception is antithetical to the ethos of craft.

So is craft inherently better suited for certain categories or industries?

It is extremely difficult for large, multinational corporations to credibly exemplify craft because their very structure and reason for being are generally in opposition to it. Just because a product or process is deemed "bespoke" or "artisanal" in a strategy document doesn't mean that it is. Caveat emptor.

Qualities that are more consistent with craft include: original, authentic, singular, personal, distinct, human, idiosyncratic, quirky, limited and local.

I am dubious about the idea of craft "at scale." The Wiener Werkstätte (1903–1932) certainly succeeded in bringing a range of well-designed and finely crafted products to market, but its reach was limited. It's extremely difficult to scale up and maintain a level of craft, because essentially what you're talking about is attention to detail. That takes someone with an eye and someone who cares.

For better or worse, craftsmanship is inherently inconvenient, and inconvenience doesn't readily "scale."

What is it that consumers are seeking—emotionally or tangibly—from craft brands?

The Arts and Crafts movement was a response to industrial production in England, and then its ideas spread to other countries. If there's a resurgence of interest in craft it's not because of mass industrialization, but because of mass digitization.

I personally find on-screen experiences—reading, communicating, designing—to be poor substitutions for books, in-person conversations or working at my

drafting table. Are digital simulacra convenient? Absolutely. But because we know that there is no there there, we crave the real: the material world, physical experiences and objects whose very existence is a protest against digital homogenization.

In an increasingly virtual world, many of us thirst for tangible alternatives. This desire manifests in behaviors—rock climbing, for example, or pilgrimages to Burning Man—as well as in fetishistic purchases: handmade titanium bicycle frames, 180g vinyl records, single-origin this, small-batch that.... These trends are easy to parody, of course, but the underlying motivation is palpable. They'd rather have less of something as long as it's made with integrity.

So who is doing craft well, and what about their process or product stands out to you?

The Swedish ceramicist Ingegerd Råman designs beautiful, functional objects—pottery, glassware, cutlery—that are produced by a few manufacturers. Her understanding of form and the material properties of glass and fired clay are profound. Råman's work embodies craft as both a verb and a noun: as a working process and as a finished object.

An example of a larger company in the US that is craft-aligned is the direct-to-consumer clothing brand Everlane. Beyond offering well-designed, well-made clothes at a fair price, the company is committed to working with “Ethical Factories.” For instance, its form sandal factory in Florence, Italy, employs twenty and is family-owned and family-run; its denim factory in Vietnam is LEED-certified, recycles 98 percent of its water and mixes its manufacturing waste with concrete to create bricks for use in construction.

Everlane also touts its “Radical Transparency,” a concept that plays out on their website in the form of what is typically regarded as proprietary information: the true cost of all their products, including materials, labor, and transportation, as well as details about the factories that manufacture all their products. My guess is that Everlane chief executive Michael Preysman would agree with Gustav Stickley's contention that designed objects—and businesses—should educate the public and seek to better the world rather than degrade it.

Why is it that how things are made, and even a company's intention behind why they made their product, is increasingly important to consumers?

Many consumers now have some sense that every purchase they make can be

understood as a political act with consequences. Does buying that soda contribute to climate change? Does giving that clothing brand your money perpetuate income inequality?

Consumers want to see themselves as being part of a larger narrative where their purchasing choices make a positive difference in the world. That new car may elicit associations with power, speed and sex, but if the brand mistreats its female employees, or pollutes developing nations, or supports a socially regressive candidate for president, then by extension your embrace of that car company facilitates mistreatment, pollution and regression. As we more fully understand our collective power as consumers, we will do more than passively consume; we will actively demand change.

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