

The Impact of Font and Color as a Visual Stimulant for a Viewer

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In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Western art world experienced a massive change. The previous culture of art was dismantled; ideas of enlightenment triumphed. With this, art innovated, creating fields like graphic design. However, to ignore color and font -- key elements of graphic design -- is a disservice. The complete history of color is untraceable, but in the context of graphic design color became integral to manuscripts, a constant in their creation. Fonts history commenced alongside the development of the blackletter font in the thirteenth century. The birth of our modern day understandings of font and color came in 1441, with the creation of the Gutenberg Press, which launched the birth of printing and laid the foundation for graphic design. Studies about the two were launched in an effort to find their maximum potential, with conclusions being drawn from their psychology; one such study being color psychology, which explores the connection between color and human behavior. From the *Beatus Manuscript* (figure 1),¹ 784 AD to *Roberto Burle Marx Brazillian Modernist* (figure 3), 2016, I would argue that a dialogue of universal connections between color and emotion is evident. As social science scholars Shannon B. Cuykendall and Donald D. Hoffman observe, “A color associated to such a critical object or event would come to be associated as well with the emotion it evokes.”² In other words, font psychology actively examines how typefaces transmit emotion. This paper will explore how fonts and color read in specific ways and are designed to convey a certain energy to the viewer. These properties place the designer in a position where decisions

¹Elizabeth S. Boleman, “De Coloribus: The Meanings of Color in Beatus Manuscripts” *The University of Chicago Press* 38 (1999): 22-27.

² Shannon B. Cuykendall, Donald D. Hoffman, “From Color To Emotion Ideas and Explorations,” UCI Social Sciences, University of California Irvine, <http://www.cogsci.uci.edu/~ddhoff/FromColorToEmotion.pdf>

have to be continuously kept in mind in order to create the optimal image that will resonate in the brain as a harmony.³

An elitism and drastic differences in education level in the craft of book production marks one of the primary differences between books made in the eighth century and books being made today. For example, in *Roberto Burle Marx Brazillian Modernist*, a book created to accompany the Jewish Museum's 2016 exhibition of the landscape architect's work, the craftsmanship of the book was aimed to create a contemporary feel. The pages were left unlined, the size was kept small to be easily utilized, and the images were color treated to reflect the modern aesthetic of Burle Marx. By contrast, several hundred years prior to Burle Marx, the craft of medieval manuscripts was dominated by elitism and private education. Manuscripts were made for a variety of subjects, most notably as Christian scripture, thereby limiting authorship. However, production was exclusive to monasteries. The process, incredibly formulaic, showcased the elitism of the craft. For example, the Beatus Manuscript (figure 1) was made in two editions: branch one and branch two. The first branch was simplistic and schematic, only visually explaining religious texts. The second branch saw a "profound transformation" in style and design. The new book had new illustrations as well the previous work being "enriched and enlarged."⁴ The illustrations were incredibly costly due to their materials; images were created by natural pigments -- cochineal for red, lapis lazuli for blue. The colors themselves also held value. Historically, colors are culturally linked to certain emotions: in the west, red, for example, symbolizes passion and danger, and blue symbolizes authority and serenity. Colors are

³ "Finding your 'type': Font psychology and typography inspiration in logo design" Fabrik, Fabrik Brand, last modified February 9, 2018, <https://fabrikbrands.com/font-psychology-and-typography-inspiration-in-logo-design/>

⁴ "Illustrated Beatus Manuscripts" Oxford Bibliographies, accessed July 28, 2019, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396584/obo-9780195396584-0241.xml#firstMatch>

chosen in these manuscripts to present such emotions to the viewer subconsciously, affecting the way the viewer interacts with the design.

In combination of the required education for production -- itself a rarity -- and the cost of materials, manuscripts were reserved for the select few. The process of creating a book was slow to form and incredibly detailed; book making was a completely individualized activity. However, the creation of the Gutenberg Printing Press revolutionized printing in its mechanized speed. The process of book was no longer on a page to page basis. Font and page material became standardized, driving in even further simplification in printing. Black ink became a constant and typeface becoming more simplified -- moving from blackletter (figure 2), a semi decorative style, to fonts such as Times New Roman, a font renown for its simplicity and as an easy read.

Books once stood as a representation of the elite due to their complexity and expenses, but have since changed to become objects of everyday usage and ease of access. It has become a practice concerned largely with the success of the graphics. Due to the connection forged between elite society and the manuscripts of the Middle Ages, it is tempting to consider books to be stuck with its elite past. The ongoing simplification of the book has since disrupted this perception. Today, considerably less attention is given to overall image of the book as materials have shifted to create a subconscious connection of lower, everyday value. To illustrate, the paper used by the Gutenberg press was made of cotton while contemporary books are made from chemical wood pulp. Very few modern day books hold the same value as an illuminated manuscript, documents that continue to maintain an image of prestige, a result of the fact that the individual approach to book creation was deserted for easy mass production. Books are ubiquitous and no longer viewed as a rarity. Books have decreased in size, granting them easy

accessibility and transportation. Also, public forums such as bookstores and libraries host an enormous selection of books, further amplifying their status as a commercial, rather than precious, object. Along with this shift in the evolution of the book, art book graphic designers now focus on the overall presentation and its effect on the viewer.

In a discussion with Rita Jules, a senior graphic designer at Miko Books, a publishing firm in Brooklyn, I discussed her work in *Roberto Burle Marx Brazilian Modernist* (figure 3), specifically her application of font and color. Our conversation largely focused on the book's expression of modernity and how graphic choices influence a viewer's perspective. Jules mentioned the decision to color treat many of the images within the book, which made it incredibly distinctive. Jules also noted that formal decisions were partially derived by the curator of the exhibit, Jens Hoffman, who Jules observed, "is really interested in making things fresh feeling and new and so she's willing to do things that other people are not,"⁵ such as conveying the "concept and aesthetic" of Burle Marx, an ideal that Miko Books likewise aspires in each of their books.⁶ In addition to the color treatment, we discussed the usage of specific fonts in the book as well as fonts on a larger scheme. In the scheme of graphic design, fonts have emotive qualities; a font can be read in the same way that a face conveys emotion. Font has a power to convey *something* to the reader, it can date itself to match a more classical time period and it can modernize itself to fit a contemporary aesthetic. Graphic designers, for that reason, possess a large responsibility when choosing fonts and further, the designer is responsible for keeping the work on theme. As Jules describes it, "choosing the type is one of the big design gestures that we get to do. We do research for different foundries and go online and we try things out... You try

⁵ Rita Jules, Interview by the author, Digital recording, Brooklyn, NY, July 24, 2019.

⁶ "About Miko Books" Miko Books, accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.mikobook.com/about/>

and find one that feels really satisfying and exciting for that particular imagery of the book and subject matter.”⁷

The boundary between good and bad design is muddled; there is the fact that in the chance of succeeding functionally, the artistic side of graphic design may suffer. Good design is achieved by successfully gaining the viewer’s attention through well conceived design but a bad design disregards necessary details. When given such boundaries, the concern over loss of artistic license is always present. Especially in consideration to book design, the line between art and graphic design is not always clear to the everyday viewer. Not to say that good design cannot be achieved, but it is considerably harder to form a concrete opinion. However, *Roberto Burle Marx Brazillian Modernist* (figure 3) by my accounts, is a good design. Miko Books successfully mixes the art of Burle Marx with the more academic side of graphic design. Through the genre of illuminated manuscripts may feel distant, there remains a vested interest in color and font. Books are a constant presence in contemporary life, requiring the graphics and physicality of the book to be considered. Today’s graphic designers are mindful of color and font psychology, understanding of its importance and how it is perceived by the viewers. Viewers analyze work quickly, deciding if it is a successful design in a matter of seconds. For that reason, graphic designers hold a massive responsibility to capture the viewer in finely produced and thought out work.

⁷ Rita Jules, Interview by the author, Digital recording, Brooklyn, NY, July 24, 2019.

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Figure 1

Source: <http://laseumedieval.com/en/loc/the-beatus/>

uiaz uenit it p noia un
 gl'oz a uig'ia ānis ⁊ sup' oēs
 qui ad bella p'cederēt: q'dragi
 taq'iq' milia sexcēn quūqua
 ginta. De filiis uida p' geneā
 tiones ⁊ familias ac domos
 cognationū suaz p' nom'ia
 singuloz a uicesimo āno et

Figure 2

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Calligraphy_malmesbury_bible arp.jpg

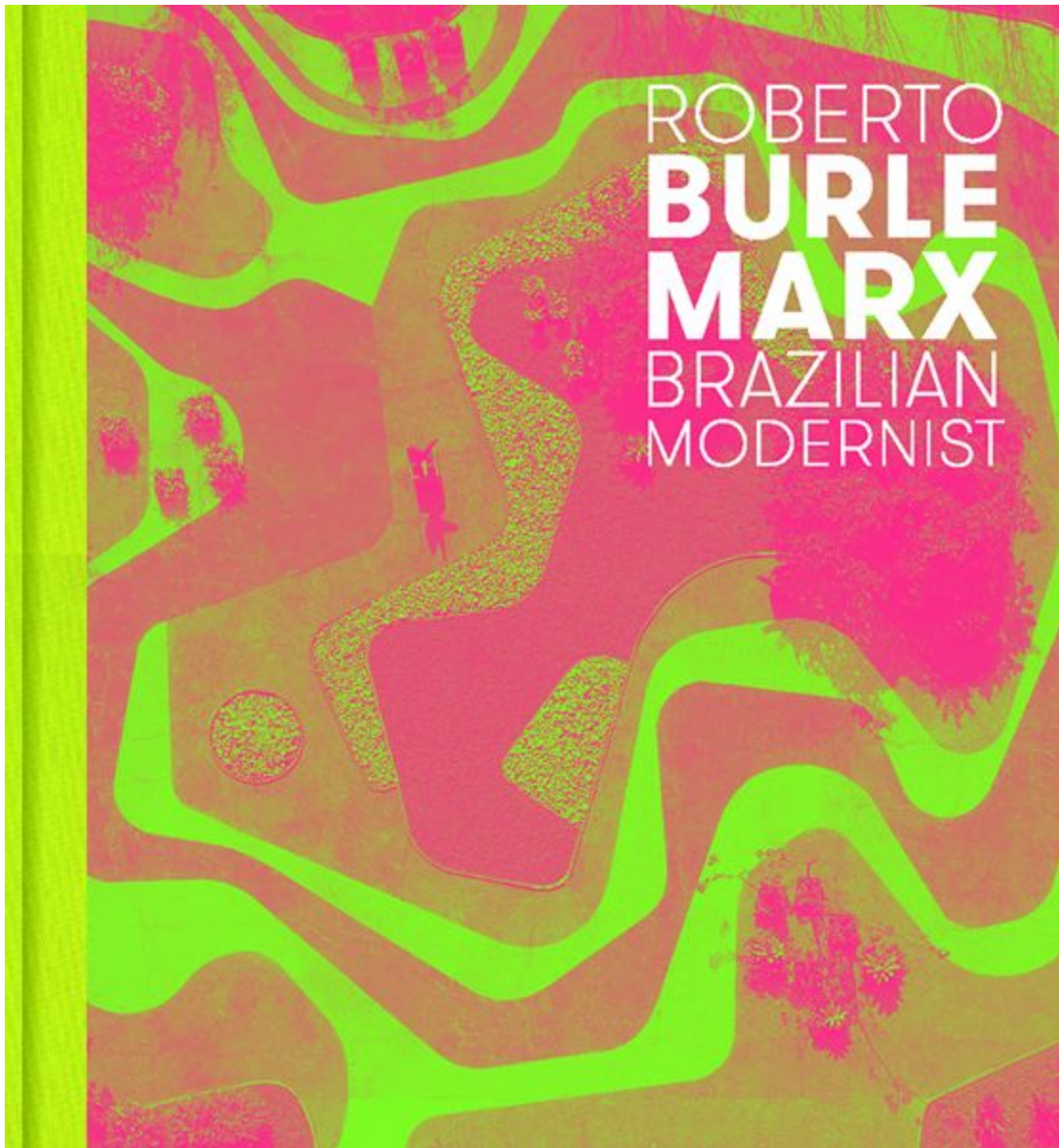


Figure 3

Source: <https://yalebooks.co.uk/display.asp?k=9780300212150>