

Design as an Extension of Content:
The Paratext of an Art Book

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In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette claims that graphic design “is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public.”¹ It elevates written work into a book. Designers work in a culture that values desirability, but instead of creating trivial one-note designs, they work to infuse subject matter into elements of design in order to create meaningful style. To gain a deeper understanding of graphic design, I sat down with Rita Jules, Art Book Designer at Miko McGinty Inc., who explained the nuances of one of their publishing projects. An Art Book is a record of an exhibition, featuring pictures of art pieces that were or are on display, as well as text describing the history of the theme, all the while preserving the intent of the curator. Together, Jules and I examined *Enlightened Princesses*, an Art Book about an exhibition in Kensington Palace that focused on three women of high status in the British Court, and generally discussed the intention behind each design. In essence, every material aspect of a book carries the intent of the subject matter, and even small aspects of design can contribute to a reader’s understanding.

In *Designing Design*, Kenya Hara writes how books are “information sculpture,” meaning that the design of each and every book is an art form.² The experience of a physical book adds to the actual subject matter, for a physical book, according to Leslie Howsam in “The Study of Book History,” carries “further ‘text’ in its formats, materials, design and impression,” in such a way that textuality and materiality can merge to form an identity.³ Design, furthermore, influences tone and establishes or broadcasts where a book belongs and how readers should interact with it. For example, with 571 pages of rather thick coated material, a gold foil spine, a

¹ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

² Kenya Hara, *Designing Design* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2007), 196.

³ Leslie Howsam, *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.

clothbound cover stamped with a golden type, and illustrated endpapers, it is clear that *Enlightened Princesses* has been designed to feel impressive and almost intimidating. This is a royal book unfit to be read casually, and the formal air around its design places this monograph in an educational environment as opposed to the home. Ultimately, the identity created by a book's materiality elevates it from an informational resource to an art object infused with emotion.

An essential part of any design process is the consideration of the consumer, in this case, the reader, and book designers, in particular, have to ensure that their product is attractive and made with good design. The claim of good design, however, is very subjective. All design has a goal and those goals differ from person to person. Similarly, how each person receives and perceives design elements is reflective of their personal biases. Western design philosophies reflect a capitalist belief system where visual appeal, not usability, is viewed as the top priority. In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Don Norman writes that “[w]e are surrounded with objects of desire, not objects of use,” meaning that the majority of material items emphasize attractive design as opposed to effective or usable design.⁴ While this consumer stance can be seen as corrupted, it is the catalyst that refines a designer's understanding of their audience and enables them to use said knowledge to create a targeted product that is appealing and desirable.

The work of a designer, such as Rita Jules at McGinty Books, is to create an attractive spread with the spirit of its subject matter woven throughout. They are making great use of paratext, a concept introduced by Gérard Genette in the 1980s as a means of acknowledging when the actual materiality of a book furthers the reader's understanding of the actual text. He

⁴ Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 291.

writes that “there are cases in which graphic realization is inseparable from literary intention.”⁵ Genette’s book, *Paratexts*, further explains how the choices made by graphic designers are purposefully infused with each book’s message, and examines the sheer number of details that contribute to the experience of a book.

Miko McGinty Inc. designs Art Books while attempting to capture the spirit of each exhibition into publication.⁶ Rita Jules is a Senior Designer who, in an interview, offered insight as to how a book such as *Enlightened Princesses* was purposefully designed to speak for its text. *Enlightened Princesses* is an Art Book about three German women of high standing in the British Court during the Hanoverian era in the 18th century. This monograph examines the difficulties of being a woman at court, and how each aristocrat navigated those difficulties while supporting ideas of the oncoming Enlightenment Period. The paratext of this book is mainly centered around the classicalism and royalty of the British Court. Jules asserts that, “ideally you are bringing out all of the subtexts of the imagery” through design.⁷ Elitism and extravagance are exemplified by the abundance of gold accents in *Enlightened Princesses*, including gold foil book spine and gold spot color (Figure 1). Additionally, in terms of classical reference, the chosen typeface, Adobe Caslon Pro, has serifs that lend a more traditional and regal feel (Figure 2). Jules also points out that a clothbound hardcover with stamping is a very classic design choice befitting of stately British monarchs (Figure 3). These stylistic nuances may not be obvious to the reader, but they come together to form a mood that supports and further establishes the book’s content.

⁵ Genette, *Paratexts*, 34.

⁶ Miko Books, “About.” Accessed July 24, 2019. <https://www.mikobook.com/about/>

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

The culture of design is often thought of as shallow because often good design is measured by desirability. Even so, book design seems inherently honorable. Art Books are made for the general public with the goal to educate those interested. Thus the ability of an Art Book to provide a resource for the public, as well as to promote museum exhibitions, makes the design morally good. However, the effectiveness of products published by Miko McGinty Inc. varies greatly depending on the audience. In my opinion, though, the care each designer puts into capturing each exhibition's spirit is extremely successful and a compelling form of design.

It is a very American stance to attribute the success of many to one individual, seeing as we live in an individualized world where fabricated stories of individual success are widely believed. In his essay, "Who Climbed Everest?" Jacob Hacker observes that this inability to see the organizations working behind a single person "is a form of blindness."⁸ He urges society to reward and blame on a deeper level than just the individual, and emphasizes the need to start seeing the "powerful role of organizations."⁹ I would elaborate on that point and recognize that the work of designers is often overlooked. Design holds the world together, and every material object has the effort of so many people behind it, but we are essentially blind to that work. We need to start seeing the overwhelming amount of effort that goes into every object and start to appreciate the army behind the war hero, the organization behind the climber, and the designer behind the book.

⁸ Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 103.

⁹ Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, 103.

Images

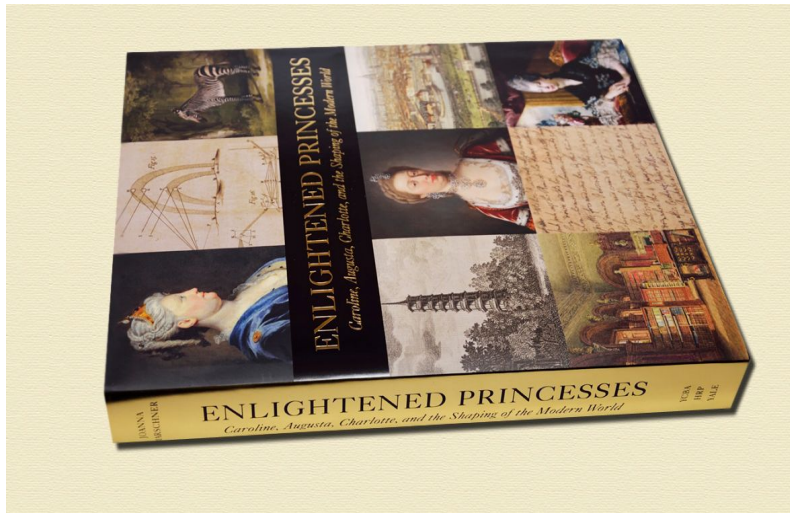


Figure 1:

Source:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4st8axa>



Figure 2:

Source:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3xsvjua>

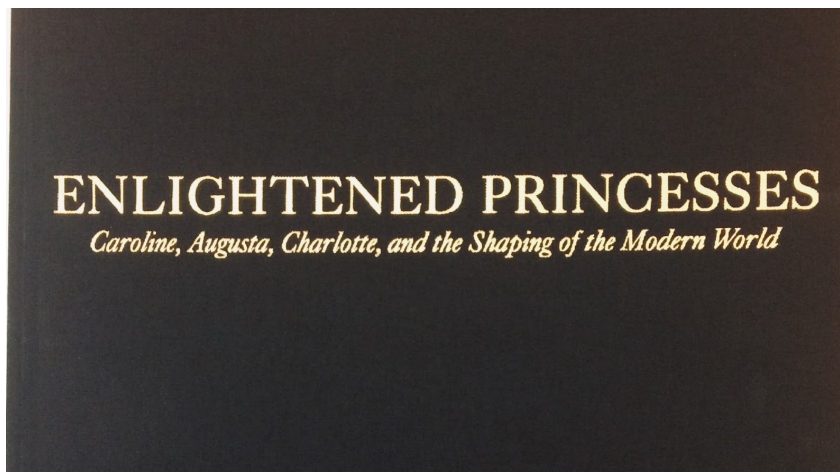


Figure 3:

Source: Author's photograph

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