Alms for Oblivion:
The History of Women in
Early American Graphic Design
Ellen Mazur Thomson

Time hath, my Lord, a wallet at his back, Wherein he puts
alms for oblivion, A great-siz’d monster of ingratiations…
William Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida

When Linda Nochlin’s article “Why Have There Been No Great
Women Artists?” appeared in 1971, it generated enormous interest
in neglected work by women artists.1 Nochlin challenged traditional
art historians to analyze the institutional and ideological structures
that distort what women have accomplished or were unable to
achieve. She warned that women must “face up to the reality of
their history and of their present situation, without making excuses
or puffing mediocrity. Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is
not, however, an intellectual position.”2 Since then, feminist histori-
ans have explored the limitations placed on women in pursuing
their artistic careers, as well as the representations of those women
who did succeed.3 Graphic design historians, however, have only
recently faced the biases in their own field and begun to identify
individual women and document their position in graphic design
history.

Martha Scotford Lange began this process by showing that
the major texts used to teach graphic design concentrate on the
work of a limited number of “great men” and that, graphic design
historians, either consciously or unconsciously, have created an
unacknowledged canon that excludes women.4 She suggests that
cultural history, rather than art history, would provide a better
model for historians to follow.

This essay is the result of preliminary research into the
conditions that governed the role of women in early modern
American graphic design. By concentrating on the period from
approximately 1850 to 1920, the beginning of “professionalization,”
this essay explores the extent and character of women’s participa-
tion in this development. While it is important to recover the names
of individual designers, it is equally important to understand some
of the conditions and attitudes that determined the fortunes of
women graphic designers by examining their treatment in both
literature of the time and later.

During this period, graphic design emerged as a profession,
one that developed in response to social changes and technologies

1 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been
article also appeared as “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?” Women in
Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness, ed. Vivian Gornick and
2 Nochlin, Art News, 70.
3 Feminist art historians have expanded
Nochlin’s agenda considerably. For a
overview of feminist art criticism and art
history in the 1970s and 1980s, see
Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia
Mathews, “The Feminist Critique of Art
History,” Art Bulletin LXIX, 3 (September
1987), 326–357.
4 Martha Scotford Lange, “Is There a
Canon of Graphic Design History?” AIGA
3–5. Lange analyzed the contents of
eight well-known histories: James Craig
and Bruce Barton’s Thirty Centuries of
Graphic Design, Alan Fern and Mildred
Constantine’s Word and Image, Steven
Heller and Seymour Chwast’s Graphic
Style, Philip B. Meggs’ A History of
Graphic Design, and Josef Mueller-
Brockman’s A History of Visual
Communication.
that generated an enormous amount of printed material for mass consumption. The concept of graphic design and the professional graphic designer evolved in the United States during the second half of the 19th century. \(^5\) Previously, compositors, printers, typographers, and artist-engravers designed as part of their craft. The revolution in press and paper technology, photography and photomechanical reproduction, and transportation and business practices encouraged specialization and professionalism. By 1900, art directors, commercial-art managers, layout artists, and illustrators, sometimes called “designer,” were recognized professionals. \(^6\)

Those trained in printing, typography, engraving, and illustration moved into separate art departments of advertising agencies, book and magazine publishers, or worked as free-lance designers. Relying on basic texts of graphic design history one would assume that women were marginal if not absent in this transformation. \(^7\)

In part, the omission of women from design history occurred because historians have emphasized graphic design’s roots in relation to printing’s history. By doing so, they remove graphic design from its cultural context, and thus tend to ignore or de-emphasize the impact of the advertising industry and new theories of art and education on visual communication. \(^8\) Arguably, advances in transportation technology that linked the continent by rail and ship, and the advent of mass marketing and widespread literacy that spurred the growth of newspapers and magazine publications are as significant as the revolution in print technology that occurred at the same time. Unfortunately, advertising historians have ignored the visual aspects of advertising, concentrating instead on the work of advertising agents, copy writers, and agency heads. \(^9\) Feminist art historians, even when they include illustrators in their histories, are inclined to ignore the commercial aspects of their work. \(^10\) Art historical models, as noted above, are often based on the great men and monuments model and fail to go beyond narrations of lives, assessments of influence, and progressions of styles.


\(^6\) W. A. Dwiggins first used the term “graphic design” in 1922 to describe professions involved in the design of commercial printing, commercial illustration, type design, and advertising design. I have followed these general parameters. “New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design,” The Boston Evening Transcript, (August 29, 1922). Graphic Arts Section, Part III, 6.

\(^7\) See Lange, op.cit., for the omission of women designers from major graphic design texts.

\(^8\) The recognized “great men” of early graphic design were trained in a variety of fields and spent their professional lives in a wide range of activities that now constitute professional design practice. They are, nonetheless, first identified as “printers” in the literature. For example, William Addison Dwiggins (1880–1956) worked in advertising for twenty years, and in a long and successful career was a calligrapher, illustrator, prolific writer, and master puppeteer, as well as a typographer and book designer.


There is a brief discussion of advertising art in one chapter “Art, Artists, and Illustrators,” but both text and pictures feature the work of James Montgomery Flagg, J.C. Leyendecker and Norman Rockwell. Jessie Willcox Smith is the only woman mentioned and she is represented by a small black and white reproduction. A perfect example of Lange’s canon.

\(^10\) Nonetheless, the two most useful biographical references in graphic design are concerned with women artists. See Chris Petteys, Dictionary of Women Artists: An International Dictionary of Women Artists Born Before 1900 (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), and Charlotte Steifer Rubinstein, American Women Artists from Early Indian Times to the Present (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982).

One of the problems encountered in any attempt track women is that of multiple surnames and cross-references are not always used. Also, many women and men signed their work with initials instead of first names and some first names are gender neutral—a problem in identifying signatures in published work incases when it is signed. And most advertisements and magazine illustrations were not signed.
In describing women's experiences in the printing and advertising industries, and in commercial illustration, I hope to highlight the areas in which women participated in graphic design, as well as show how their experiences reveal the profession's ties to other aspects of American culture.11

In a pioneering article, Cheryl Buckley argues that women's roles in all aspects of the design field have been defined by "the sexual division of labor, assumptions about femininity, and the hierarchy that exists in design."12 During the second half of the nineteenth century many women worked in the printing industry, but in limited capacities. They were gradually forced out of the printing trades because male-dominated unions argued that the work was too physically demanding even as technology made it less so. Women also worked in the advertising industry but are absent from its history because they were unable to reach higher levels of management where their names would be associated with particular campaigns.

The women's movement, identified with the fight for voting rights, grew in power and forced the nation to confront "the woman question." The number of schools and colleges, including schools of fine and applied art open to women, increased dramatically.13 This was in part a result of theories expounded by John Ruskin and William Morris, and their influence in the American Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts movements.14 Changing attitudes towards the applied arts and women's education gave women illustrators new opportunities, but often encouraged them to work on domestic subjects and in a decorative style.

At the same time, women were ignored in the literature. A good example of this can be seen in the case of Frances Flora Bond Palmer (1812–1876), known as Fanny Palmer. Palmer was one of three full-time lithographers on the staff of Currier & Ives. All but forgotten since her death, modern feminist art historians have revived her memory.15 Born and trained in England, she emigrated...
Illustration 1
"Rocky Mountains," Frances Flora Bond Palmer (1812–1876)

To New York in the 1840s. Palmer was responsible for over 200 Currier & Ives lithographs; she made the original drawings and transferred them to the stone. She worked in a tremendous range of subject matter: landscapes, cityscapes, hunting scenes, still lifes. She made prints of trains, steamships, buildings, and dramatic battles from the Civil War, subjects not defined as “feminine.” Her “Rocky Mountains, Emigrants Crossing the Plains” (1866) was one of the company’s most popular prints and was found in homes throughout the country. She contributed to the technical aspects of commercial lithography. She developed a method of printing a background tone and, with Charles Currier, improved lithographic crayons. Although she was unusually gifted and productive, her historical fate is, nonetheless, typical. Palmer was an employee, so her work was not recognized as that of an individual but subsumed under the Currier & Ives imprint. She supported an alcoholic husband and her children, yet in her obituary she is identified only as her husband’s wife, or in the less than felicitous terms of that day, “a relict of Edmund S. Palmer of Leicester, England.” She is mentioned only as a part of Currier & Ives history until feminist art historians became interested in her work.

To understand the positions women found in the graphic design profession, we must turn to documentary sources that provide a broader picture of the profession and its history.

Documentation

Literature outside the usual scope of design history often illuminates important aspects of the graphic design profession. The relationship between the struggling printers’ unions and women who worked in the printing trade was discussed in union journals and the popular press of the period. Modern histories of women work-

Note 15, continued


A fine example is the work of Carroll D. Wright, chief of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor, whose study appeared in 1889 as The Working Girls of Boston (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1889. Reprint. New York: Arno, 1969). It was undertaken “to ascertain the moral, sanitary, physical and economic conditions of the working girls of Boston,” including those in the printing trades. [p. 1] Wright concluded that, “the working girls are as respectable, as moral, and as virtuous as any class of women in our community; that they are making as heroic a struggle for existence as any class is a fact which all the statistics prove.” [p. 120] And in case anyone missed the point, he spelled it out: “...girls cannot work hard all day and be prostitutes too.” [p. 121]


Women also worked in printing establishments as typesetters or operators on hand presses, but there is insufficient information to determine who designed type or page layouts. We know that binderies employed women in significant numbers, see Abbott and Breckinridge.
Trade magazines for printers, typographers, and advertisers first appeared in the 1850s; by 1880 their numbers had increased dramatically. They reflect the prevailing attitudes of their professions towards women and only unintentionally reveal women's participation. Unfortunately, as will be seen in the discussions that follow, these journals often preferred to ignore them.

Histories of art, particularly of American graphics illustration and biographies of American women artists, contain information on women who worked as illustrators for magazines, books, and posters. They continue to emphasize painters, sculptors, and “fine” printmakers untainted by commercialism, although women art historians have written about individual women illustrators. By concentrating on broader cultural issues rather than individual artists, a few art historians have shown how particular movements, such as the Aesthetic and the Arts and Crafts, have influenced educational and professional opportunities for women.

Printers
A significant number of men associated with the beginning of graphic design began their careers in printing establishments and so it is logical to look for women there as well. From the colonial period on, women were well represented in the American printing industry. Several presses, including the first press in North America, the Cambridge Press established in 1639, were run by women. It is often argued that women only became printers because it was their family's trade, but this was just as true for male printers. Girls, however, were trained in the printshop at home in contrast to boys who often learned their craft during a period of apprenticeship. The issue of apprenticeship became a critical one for women professionals. There is no doubt that some women printers attained the respect of their profession. For example, The Typographic Advertiser (1869) carried an obituary for Lydia R. Bailey, a widow, who took over her husband's printing establishment. It noted that from 1808 to 1861:

[h]er office was one of the largest in Philadelphia. She instructed forty-two boys into the mysteries of typography; and some of our present prosperous master-printers served their apprenticeship under her. For a considerable period she was elected City Printer by the Councils; and her imprint was well known. She had great energy and decision of character.

Moreover, the editor saw Bailey's achievements in the wider context of political and economic rights:

Of late days we hear much talk about women's rights. Something may probably come of it to women's advantage: how we may not forecast. There is certainly room enough for improvement in the condition of many women; but will the privilege of suffrage bring it about?
Women not linked by family ties to printing were interested in the printing trade because it was relatively open to them and offered higher wages. Nonetheless, women earned considerably less than men. In Boston in 1831, for example, men earned three times as much as women and boys in the printing industry.28

By 1880, the average weekly earnings for women in all trades was $6.03, whereas in printing and publishing earned $6.61, or over 9% more.29

In 1853, the suffragette and dress reformer, Amelia Jenks Bloomer, began publication of The Lily: A Ladies’ Journal Devoted to Temperance and Literature. In 1854, she tried to hire a woman apprentice but the printers refused to work under this condition and struck both her paper and that of her husband. Bloomer persisted and finally found three women and three men to publish both papers; she paid them equal wages.

By the end of the Civil War, the number of women in printing had increased. For example, in 1868 there were 200 women typesetters in New York City, constituting 15–20% of printing trade workers.30 The printing trades attracted an increasingly larger percentage of women workers as shown in Table 1.31 Despite the introduction of new technologies that raised worker productivity, an increase in demand for printed matter allowed the total number of workers in printing to expand.32 Women workers continued to be concentrated in typesetting. In 1870, 3.7% of compositors were women; in 1880, 4.7%; in 1890, 9.9%; and in 1900, 10.3%.33

The local printing unions that had existed during the first half of the 19th century, eventually formed a national organization, the United Typographical Union in 1852. In contrast to the union’s tradition of progressivism, these all-male organizations exhibited great ambivalence towards unionizing women workers. Many printers hired women at lower wages under the guise of giving them an opportunity to learn the trade and women worked as scab labor during strikes. The unions had two options, either fight for equal wages and unionize women, or ban them from the industry.

The attitude of the printing trade journals of the period reflect these contradictions. In 1884, the editor of the The Inland Printer wrote:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Earnings in Boston; 1831</th>
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<tr>
<td>687 men earned</td>
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<tr>
<td>395 women earned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>215 boys earned</td>
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</tbody>
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29 Wertheimer, op. cit., 92.
30 Wright, op. cit., 82–83.
31 Foner, op. cit., 145.
33 Ibid., 301. While printing material increased by more than 760% from 1899 to 1929, only 120% more workers were employed. Ibid., 309.
Table 1: Number and percentage distribution of female gainful workers in printing, and allied industries, 1870–1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printing, and Allied Industries</td>
<td>4,233</td>
<td>8,947</td>
<td>23,771</td>
<td>31,613</td>
<td>45,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Women Workers</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engravers</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Women Workers</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The printers employed on the Evening Wisconsin, of Milwaukee, twenty-three in number, are on a strike because the manager of that sheet insisted, after several remonstrances, on paying the female compositors, members of the Cream City Typographical Union, twenty-eight cents instead of thirty-three cents per thousand ems—the union scale—as paid to the male compositors; and this, too, in the face of the admission that the women did better work than a majority of the men.

The action of the union in making the cause of the girls its own is worthy of all commendation. Of course, no protective organization could tolerate, for a moment, a sliding scale arrangement, all its members, irrespective of sex, age or nationality, being required to observe the minimum rate of wages. Any other policy would be suicidal. The standard raised—"equal pay for equal work"—is one which will command the sympathy of every right-minded citizen; and it is needless to add that those now engaged in this struggle have our warmest wishes for their success.33

Despite these sentiments, the very same editors advocated barring female students from trade schools and accused any woman who wanted such training—or indeed worked in the trades—of being selfish by taking jobs away from men with families to support. Although they did not all subscribe to the idea that women were incapable or less hard working, editors argued that the printing trades required a greater amount of time to develop skills and that many women workers left as soon as they married. Some of the arguments appeared in the form of patriarchal sermons on the need to protect women from the dangers of the trade: their exposure to materials dangerous to health, women’s supposed frailty and inability to carry heavy forms, and their proximity to “unsuitable” printed matter.34 Other argued that women lacked training, that they were incapable of doing anything but the most straightforward jobs.

35 The Inland Printer I, 6 (March 1884), 10.
36 The rhetoric used by both sides is fascinating. A printshop owner recommended hiring women typesetters and wood engravers because they were more obedient, did not use foul language, and cost considerably less. He concluded: At least let women have a fair opportunity to do something else besides get married. What man is there who would not resent being told that his chief ambition in life should be to be a father? Yet women are told daily that they should devote twenty years of a lifetime in the preparing for motherhood, at least ten years in bearing children, and the rest of their lives in recovering from the effects. If they prefer to think that the world is populated sufficiently, or that to bear a child does not call for sacrifice of a lifetime, they are snubbed, and especially so when they show any inclination to compete with men in trades. Male Versus Female Labor,” Art Age, III, 25 (August 1885), 14.
because few had served an apprenticeship. Women, indeed, accounted for only 9.7% of all apprentice typesetters. But the most troubling issue, and the primary focus of the opposition, was that women worked for lower wages and were used by employers to fight unionization. It was on this issue that the suffragette leader, Susan B. Anthony, entered the fray.

Anthony encouraged women to learn typesetting by taking jobs they were offered by printers, even during strikes. It is unclear if she really lacked an understanding of the need for worker solidarity as some writers charge, or if she, unlike women unionists, considered male workers so unsympathetic that they would never voluntarily integrate their shops. In a report of her fight for admittance to a union convention, printed in the Workingman’s Advocate in August 1869, Anthony said she represented:

...a class of women that had no husbands, and who were on the street penniless, homeless and without shelter. Now, I ask you what we are to do with these girls? Shall we tell them to starve in the garrets because the printers, by their own necessities, open their doors and give a slight training to a few girls for a few weeks? Shall I say to the girls, “Do not go in, but starve?” or shall I say, “Go in, and get a little skill into your hands, and fit yourselves to work side by side with men?” I want to ask the Co-operative Union of New York how many girls they have taken to learn the type-setting business? How many women have you ordered each department or establishment to take as apprentices, and to train in the art of type-setting?

Union leader Augusta Lewis clashed with Anthony over these tactics. Lewis (c.1848–1920), a journalist and typesetter, believed that by preserving union solidarity and by foregoing the immediate advantage of work, women would eventually find an equal place in union shops. Lewis founded the Women’s Typographic Union No.1 in October 8, 1968 and urged women members not to accept nonunion work. A year later, the United Typographical Union became the first national union to admit women, and in 1870, Lewis was elected corresponding secretary of the national organization. Yet Lewis was shortly disillusioned by the union’s treatment of its women members:

[We] have never obtained a situation that we could not have obtained had we never heard of a union. We refuse to take the men’s situations when they are on strike, and when there is no strike if we ask for work in union offices we are told by union foremen ‘that there are no conveniences for us.’ We are ostracized in many offices because we are members of the union; and although the principle is right, disadvantages are so many that we cannot much longer hold together.
The continued resistance to women in printing is evident in the attention they received in the trade journals. In the 1880s and 90s, the Inland Printer attacked women in the printshop, using a series of arguments to disparage their competence. The catch, of course, was that when women did succeed they were derided as unfeminine and grotesque. In describing an itinerant printer he met in western Ohio, one writer claimed:

She was dressed plainly but neatly in what might be called a cross between a traveling and office suit of brown color. The toughened expression on her face indicated that she was familiar with the tricks of the profession, versed in the study of vulgarity. No tender, trusting female was she, but a hardened, suspicious, masculine woman.

When the journals were not questioning women’s abilities, they ignored them. However, they were quick to take umbrage at similar treatment from women. For example, the Inland Printer (1883) reprinted an article from a British trade journal reporting that women compositors in Boston published a journal called Elle:

This paper is veritable man-hater; not the slightest mention of man in any shape or form is to be found in its columns, neither is the genus homo allowed to hawk it!

The notice is doubly significant. Elle does not appear in any of the standard sources on magazine literature and it is possible that no copies have survived. We know of its existence now only because it irritated the editors of a mainstream journal.

The introduction of new technology, particularly the Mergenthaler Linotype, beginning in the 1880s, might have increased opportunities for women. The typographer’s union admitted that women learned to work with the system more quickly, but also
charged that they lacked endurance. In the end the union insisted that only fully qualified (i.e., male printers), should be allowed to use them.\textsuperscript{44} In typesetting, traditionally the one printing profession in which women significantly competed for work, they lost ground. By 1900, only 8\% of women belonged to unions, compared with 32\% of men. Only 10\% of compositors were women, while only 700, or 5.8\%, operated typesetting machines.\textsuperscript{44} Barred from the apprentice system and trade schools and betrayed by the trade unions ostensibly representing them, working class women rarely followed men who made the transition from the printshop into the design of printed material.\textsuperscript{45}

The private press movement, with its emphasis on the highest standards of presswork, was based on William Morris’ Kelmscott Press and the English Arts and Crafts tradition. It inspired American printers and designers from Boston to San Francisco. But women are excluded almost completely from its history although from fragmentary records we know that their presses existed.\textsuperscript{46} In San Francisco, the Women’s Cooperative Printing Union was founded in 1868 and survived until 1880. In 1873, two sisters, trained designers and wood engravers, founded Crane and Curtis Company there. Women ran the Chemith Press in Minneapolis in 1902 and the Butterfly Press from 1907 to 1909 in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{47} Bertha Goudy, who operated the Village Press with her husband, Frederic Goudy, is fulsomely praised only in studies of her husband’s life and work.\textsuperscript{48}

Women book designers gained opportunities and recognition as the private press movement grew. In 1901, The Craftsman devoted a whole issue to book binding and printing. Women wrote the articles and it featured women’s binderies along with the work of presses inspired again by Morris’ Kelmscott Press. Helen Marguerite O’Kane designed books for the Elston Press, owned by her husband. She also worked for commercial presses. Ellen Gates Starr, a colleague of the social worker Jane Addams, was also a disciple of William Morris and shared his beliefs on art and socialism. Starr studied book design in England with T. Cobden-Sanderson at the Doves Press and returned to Chicago to establish a bookbindery in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{49} Helena De Kay Gilder is now remembered for one book cover: a gold peacock feather on a plain blue ground that captures the essence of the Aesthetic style.\textsuperscript{50}

Modern historians regard the relative openness of the Arts and Crafts movement to women’s participation in applied arts for their success in this field, but contemporary observers, even participants, ascribed their abilities to gender-specific skills. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, Starr’s teacher, is quoted as saying: [w]omen ought to do the best work in book-binding, for they possess all the essential qualifications of success: patience for detail, lightness of touch, and dexterous fingers.\textsuperscript{51}

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\textbf{Table Title} & \textbf{Data} \\
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Column 2 & Row 2 \textsuperscript{b} \\
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Alice C. Morse, an accomplished book cover designer, also claimed that women possessed an inherent ability:

Women seem to have a remarkable faculty for designing. Their intuitive sense of decoration, their feeling for beauty of line and harmony of color, insures them a high degree of success.”

It is no coincidence that the Arts and Crafts Societies, that began in 1897, in Boston and New York, and spread to cities and towns in other parts of the country, were one of the few clubs to include women. However, when the prestigious Society of Printers was founded in 1905 in Boston, no women were members. In 1911 fourteen men began “The Graphic Group” in New York, dedicated to the “highest in the art of printing.” They later formed the nucleus of what became, in 1914, the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

Advertising Artists

Although women were immediately recognized as important targets for advertisers’ messages, they were rarely mentioned in the early advertising journals as practitioners and are absent from advertising histories until the 1920s. Information about women in the advertising industry appears fortuitously in advertising trade journals that were not sympathetic to them, but intermittently championed the work of individual women. More frustrating to the researcher are journal reports on design contests in which women’s names appear regularly as winners, suggesting that there must have

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53 For a history of the Boston group, see Mary Spain, The Society of Arts and Crafts, 1897–1924 (Boston and New York: The Society, 1924).
been a significant number of trained and employed women in the field.

With its very first issue in 1891, Profitable Advertising sounded the derisive note that it sustained throughout. Although somewhat incoherent, the ridicule and warning were impossible to ignore:

*The Boston Globe* is encouraging women to become “writers on business,” female “Powers,” as it were; scientific experts, etc. O, General Taylor, this is too much. And offering prizes for advertisements, too, written by women! Great guns!

there are about 6,946 male scientific advertising experts in the United States who will soon with Othello raise the very devil about their flown occupation. The result will be more disastrous than the female typewriter craze. Of course the women will cut rates. Boys, get together, formulate a union and boycott *The Globe*. Or start the women off on writing advertisements for pants. Would they succeed? Well, *would* they? They would find virtues in pants us poor males never dreamt of.”

Women’s participation on the editorial staff of any trade journal was extremely rare and, given prevailing attitudes, even when they were present, editorial policy was not enlightened. Kate E. Griswold began at Profitable Advertising as manager and became editor in October 1893. In June of that year, an article appeared that she may have written. Signed “Miss Progress,” it was a diatribe against uniform wage scales. The writer acknowledges that women have been limited in their professional opportunities in the past “but that day has gone.”

Oh, no, we are not ranting “women’s righters” in the common acceptance of the term. We have no fondness for women who disgust men, as well as members of their own sex, by their arbitrary methods of attempting to secure what they are pleased to sum up as their “rights.”

Even when women’s work was noticed, their achievements were attributed to their femininity. Advertising Experience’s February 1898 issue featured advertising photographers, Beatrice Tonnesen and her sister, Clara Tonnesen Kirkpatrick. In praising their work, the editors claimed: “[t]he fact that the Tonnesens are women photographers has no doubt made it possible for them to secure a better class and a larger selection of models that could be secured by a male photographer.”

Indeed, photography may have provided an entry for some women into advertising although there is very little research in this area. Photography was a fad in the 1890s and many of the women who began at the time preferred to remain “amateurs” devoted to personal artistic expression. We do know of some who did become
professionals and worked in portraiture and photojournalism. In a study from a feminist perspective, C. Jane Gover shows that from 1890 to 1920 photography was a profession adopted by economically secure women who found in it a measure of personal freedom and yet remained firmly tied to Victorian gender definitions:

The camera provided women with the means of stepping beyond the private, domestic space. At the same time, the women’s lifestyles and imagery sustained middle class ideology as it celebrated the domestic ideal and woman’s place as nurturer. Unfortunately, Gover, like most photography historians, does not consider advertising photography, although she does mention Beatrice Tennesen in other contexts.

Advertising posters also provided work for many illustrators, including a significant number of women. Ethel Reed is perhaps the most famous. For a short period, she designed book posters for the publisher Lamson, Wolfe and Company of Boston. She was the only woman to be the subject of a profile in *The Poster* magazine. Its author began this article with a lengthy dissertation of women’s limited abilities in general and women artists’ lack of artistry in particular. He then praised Reed, because, she:

knows well the marvelous secret of design and colours, and while she executes pictures with clever hands, she sees with her own and not masculine eyes; her work has feminine qualities, one sees in it a woman, full of sweetness and delicacy, and this is the greatest praise one can bestow upon a woman. Several other women first gained recognition as poster artists. Florence Lundborg of San Francisco designed a series of advertisements for *The Lark* as well as book illustrations and murals, Blanche McManus designed posters and illustrations for books and magazines and, in 1911, became art editor of *American Motorist*. Helen Dryden designed posters, stage scenery, illustrated for magazine and worked as an industrial designer, including automobile designs for the 1937 Studebaker.
Illustration 6

"Folly or Saintliness," by Ethel Reed.
Advertising art was rarely signed and, therefore it is difficult to identify the artist. Jessie Wilcox Smith, was an exception; her name appeared prominently on all of her work. She produced advertisements throughout her career for Campbell Soup, Eastman Kodak, and Ivory Soap. [Illustration 8: Kodak Advertisement] Helen Elna Hokinson, who later became famous for her New Yorker cartoons, designed advertisements for department stores in Chicago and New York.65

Graphic Arts, begun in 1911, profiled leading printers, designers, and advertising artists. In 1913, Elizabeth Colwell was the first and only woman to be featured.66 Colwell, a Chicago designer, did publicity for Marshall Fields and for Cowan Company. She designed bookplates and was known for her lettering and her work as a book designer. The editor, Henry Lewis Johnson, acknowledged:
It has been an axiom among designers, although just why it is hard to say, that women cannot do good lettering. Miss Colwell with many other women designers, offers direct proof to the contrary.67

From other sources we know that Colwell was a also a typographer and that she designed “Colwell Hand Letter.”68

Helen Rosen Woodward, a pioneer in advertising, wrote an autobiography that gives an overview of the practice of advertising, as well as the sexism and anti-Semitism encountered by workers at the turn of the century.69 When Woodward began in New York in 1903, agents were not only expected to plan campaigns, but to design ads, write copy, as well as hire and direct illustrators. At that time women earned $18 a week, men $25.70 In 1926 she wrote:

[the] difference between the pay of men and women for the same work has largely disappeared in the advertising business but it is still hard for women to get positions where the bigger money lies.71

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67 Ibid., 237.
68 Petteys, op. cit.
70 Ibid., 147. On this subject, Woodward, who initially resisted the suffragette message, wrote: “About 1909 the women began to change. In a few years the desire for the vote was nearly universal with them. That desire was focused by the suffrage propaganda, but it grew exactly as grew the self-respect of the women who worked. Their wages went up before the wish for suffrage came, not afterward.”
71 Ibid., 102–103.

Illustration 9
Examples of work by Elizabeth Colwell.
This was corroborated by Taylor Adams, who began his advertising career in the 1920s:

Women began flowering in the creative departments of agencies in the '20s, but you could hardly have said they were prevalent. With a single outstanding exception, they were either temporary tokenists hired for specific tasks (such as "influencing" decision makers of client or prospect) or more often anonymous foot-sloggers who rarely made it to title or stockholder.\textsuperscript{72}

In fact, the work of most advertising artists, male and female, was unsigned and ephemeral. And although trade magazines encouraged higher standards of composition, drawing, and typography, little is known about the people who created professional advertisements.

Illustrators

To the degree that the proponents of the Aesthetic movement and the Arts and Crafts movement broke down barriers between fine and applied art, they raised many of the crafts traditionally associated with women to a new legitimacy. They also encouraged the establishment of schools to train women in the arts, although their motives here were not straightforward. Walter Smith, an English Arts and Crafts proponent who became Massachusetts State Director of Art Education, saw the arts as a way to divert women from their struggle to gain political power:

We have a fancy that our lack of art schools and other institutions where women can learn to employ themselves usefully and profitably at work which is in itself interesting and beautiful, is one of the causes which drives them to so unsex themselves as to seek to engage in men's affairs. Give our American women the same art facilities as their European sisters, and they will flock to the studios and let the ballot-box alone.\textsuperscript{73}

In the United States, the first applied art school for women began in Philadelphia at the behest of Sarah Peter, a wealthy philanthropist, under the auspices of the Franklin Institute. The School of Design for Women opened on December 3, 1850 with a class of 94 students and expanded rapidly.\textsuperscript{74} The arguments for its establishment, found in the Franklin Institute proceedings, reflect the ideology of the Aesthetic movement: the legitimacy of the applied arts and women's contribution to them, the development of women's "natural" ability as related to her domestic life, and the non-threatening nature of women's contribution. Peter was very explicit. She wanted "to enlarge the sphere of female occupation" without endangering male employment and or upsetting women's traditional sphere:
I selected this department of industry, not only because it presents a wide field, as yet unoccupied by our countrymen, but also because these arts can be practiced at home, without materially interfering with the routine of domestic duty, which is the peculiar province of women. 76

The Institute’s chairman expanded Peter’s argument. Women are especially adept at decoration and, therefore this would not cause an economic problem:

their quick perceptions of form and their delicacy of hand very especially fit them; while even should they, in these and similar branches of labor, finally supplant men entirely, no evil could occur, especially in a country like ours, where such broad fields for male labor lie entirely unoccupied. 76

A large number of art schools for women, or open to women, were founded in the United States beginning in the 1870s. 77 Although women were allowed greater opportunities in art education, they were blocked from membership in artist clubs. Perhaps because illustrators did much of their work in isolation, they formed a large number of these groups and their importance cannot be overestimated. 78 Many began as informal sessions for sharing work and evolved into social occasions for editors, printers, publishers, and other potential employers to meet with artists. In short, they provided opportunities for professional advancement. Although not specifically barred, women were not members. The Society of Illustrators, founded in 1901, had 96 members by 1911, all male, and four associate members, the most successful women illustrators of the time: Elizabeth Shippen Green, Violet Oakley, May Wilson Preston, and Jessie Wilcox Smith. 79 One of the few clubs for professional women artists was founded in 1897 in Philadelphia. Led by Alice Barber Stephens, an illustrator and teacher at the School of Design, and by Emily Sartain, an artist and director of the School, the Plastic Club provided the same kind of community and publicity that male illustrators had found so useful. 80

In the 1880s and 1890s, the need for illustrations, for magazine covers and stories, outdoor advertisements, and popular fiction swelled as the number of periodicals, newspapers, and advertising posters grew. Technological developments such as steel-line engravings, the half-tone printing process, and four-color printing, combined with the growth of literacy to create a huge market for the mass circulation magazine and advertising. 81

Historians celebrated these decades as the Golden Age of Illustration. Three notable chroniclers of the time, Hopkinson Smith, Frank Weitenkampf, and Henry Pitz, included women illustrators in their discussions, but always grouped them together and then selected two or three for praise.
Hopkinson Smith was an illustrator and his *American Illustrators* was a dramatized account of the activities in New York illustrator clubs he frequented. In it he reviewed and praised American male illustrators and showed their work in beautiful reproductions. Since women were not members of the clubs, Smith mentioned them only in a review of the annual Water Color Society exhibition. While he made fun of most women artists ("their devotion to mild-eyed daisy and the familiar golden-rod standing erect in a ginger jar of Chinese blue..."), he allowed exceptions: Rosina Emmett, Mary Hallock Foote, and Alice Barber Stephens. Although they are praised, their work is not discussed or shown.

In American Graphic Art (1912), Weitenkampf also placed women illustrators in a separate category. Indeed, he remarked that the disruption of his chronological organization was "brought about by the convenient classification by sex."83 And he, too, commended the work of Foote and Stephens. Weitenkampf believed that the illustrations of Howard Pyle's women design students "exemplify various possibilities resulting from the application of the female temperament to illustration."84

Many women illustrators did specialize in domestic subjects, and some, though not all, worked in a decidedly decorative style. Howard Pyle was not only a famous illustrator, but an equally important as a teacher at the Drexel Institute in Philadelphia and at his own school for professional illustrators at Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. A third of his students at Chadds Ford were women.85 Pyle himself used a dramatic, realistic approach to illustrating, as did many of his male students. Henry Pitz, in *The Brandywine Tradition* (1968), concluded that women were naturally drawn to another style and subject matter:

The women artists, with a few exceptions, give the impression that they formed a consistent school some-what different from the men....Their almost unfailing sense of the decorative, a shared technique and their natural inclination toward feminine, homely, reposeful subjects are there in almost every picture.86

To what degree Pyle was responsible for the separate style and technique of his female students is uncertain. Oakley, Shippen, and Smith were all advanced pupils before they studied with Pyle, and they worked in proximity and supported each other professionally throughout their lives. One can also imagine that art directors encouraged a particular subject matter; illustrators then, as now, were classed as specialists in a particular genre.

Women illustrators from 1890 to 1910 were successful by any standards. Their work was published widely, they were known by name to the public in an age when popular illustrators were celebrities, and they supported themselves and their families. But in a 1912
newspaper article, “Qualities That make for Success in Women Illustrator,” the author is clear what qualities gained women illustrators adherents:

The field of illustration has been steadily widening for women since those days in the early 70s when Addie Ledyard’s pictures of ideally pretty children with sweeping eyelashes won our young hearts and Mary Hallock Foote, whose quality of exquisite tenderness, rather than the strength of her drawing, brought her ardent admirers, was illustrating her own and other people’s stories.67

Conclusion
Women graphic designers were allowed to work at jobs that took advantage of their culturally defined sex-specific skills. Since they had smaller hands, they were thought to be able typesetters. Their supposed affinity with the decorative and domesticity made them illustrators of women and children. They were encouraged to participate in those careers in which they did not threaten male economic advantage. When they ventured beyond those limits they were belittled, vilified, or “disappeared” from history.

It is clear that women participated in significant though not overwhelming numbers in all aspects of graphic design. Art and design schools were open to women or established specifically to train women. The prevailing ideologies during these periods, the Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement, elevated the status of applied arts, including the decorative and domestic arts, and allowed women to participate more fully. Nonetheless, women were still seen as having specific abilities associated with their gender. The exceptions proved the rule; historians who praised a chosen few were justified in ignoring the majority.

Note 85, continued
Since the graphic design process is a collective effort, and since women rarely headed advertising agencies, publishing houses, or magazines, their contributions are hard to document. The record of women’s participation in early graphic design is meager unless the researcher goes beyond standard design histories to statistical studies, suffragette histories, documents and institutional histories of art and design schools and artists’ clubs, and to the trade journals. A definitive history of women in graphic design, including the biographies and work of poorly known women, would right the balance. It would also provide a realistic view of the cultural, political, social and economic conditions in which graphic design began.

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