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Opening Pandora's Paintbox

Abstract

Opening Pandora's Paintbox is the title of a benchmarking national curriculum research project that was conducted in 2001 by the South Australian School of Art at the University of South Australia. The research attempted to discover how the theoretical requirements of design students studying at Australian universities are being met. The metaphor of Pandora opening the mythical jar of omens that Zeus presented her with is an extreme but colourful illustration of this research project, which uncovered some of the relationship difficulties between design, craft, art, industry, students and lecturers in the academies.

This paper engages with the findings of the research and focuses upon the growth of design history and theory as a relatively new academic discipline in Australia.

Three main areas will be addressed:

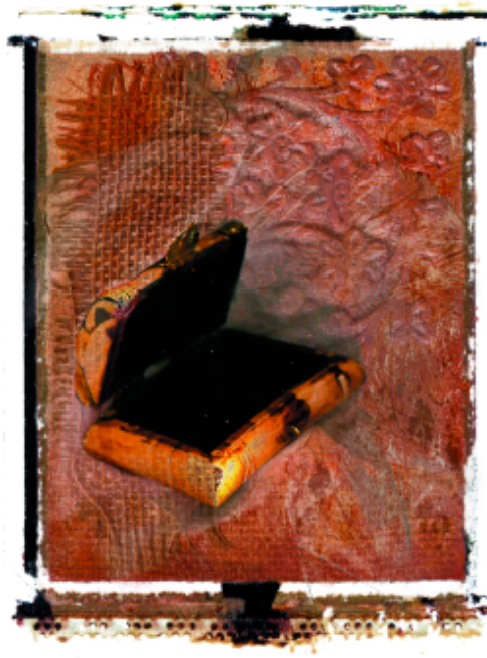
1. The students' point of view: discussion of interview transcripts as well as comments on course evaluation forms (graphic design and illustration students at the University of South Australia).
2. Content and the Canon: exploring the pedagogy (concentrating on the contribution of eleven Australian universities).
3. Tensions in the academy: feedback from the seminar hosted to discuss the links between theory and practice, the academy and industry.

The paper aims to share the research with the broad Australian community of art and design academics in the hope of fostering continued research into appropriate content and methods for history and theory courses in the changing world of art and design.

Biography

Kathleen Connellan is a lecturer in design and craft history and theory at the South Australian School of Art, at the University of South Australia. Kathleen has been lecturing in this area in both Australia and overseas for the past twelve years. Her research interests and publications are derived from a focus upon domesticity, race and gender in pre-Apartheid South Africa; modernity and the domestic appliance; craft identities and economics; ritual, appropriation and design in Australia and Africa; the Arts and Crafts Movement and curriculum development in design history.

Opening Pandora's Paintbox



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Introduction

Opening Pandora's Paintbox is the title of a national benchmarking curriculum research project in design history and theory that was conducted in 2001 by the South Australian School of Art.² The colourful name of Pandora and her mythical jar was a title that I inherited. The intriguing mythology of Pandora as the 'all-gifted' first mortal woman created by Zeus together with Hephaestus the god of craft, has maintained a powerful metaphorical presence throughout the research.³ The jar became a paintbox, the contents of which required discovery. Therefore like Epimetheus, I was presented with the gift of both Pandora and her paintbox.

The opening of the paintbox was left to me. It was not a simple lifting of the lid, the research involved a national survey of Australian universities in order to establish which universities teach design history and theory, and how these universities go about doing this. The aims were to establish Australia-wide contacts with lecturers teaching and coordinating courses in history and theory for design students. The main objectives were to discover how the theoretical requirements of design as opposed to art students are being met. The report on the project is a lengthy document that I cannot do justice to in one conference paper. Therefore this paper engages with three main areas in *Opening Pandora's Paintbox*, which include: Content and the canon – issues relating to traditional art historical pedagogy as a blueprint for teaching design content; tensions that exist between theory and practice, the academy and industry; and thirdly the students' point of view.

Research methods

All thirty-eight Australian universities' websites were searched for design history and theory courses. The use of the terminology 'design history and theory' was used as a criterion for selecting and filtering design history and theory courses from other related discipline areas. It was necessary to isolate courses that had obviously and consciously been formulated for design students. In this sense the mere act of using the term 'design' in connection with history and theory implied a separately recognised area in the curricula of the universities. Details of these courses were collated to form the Appendix of the report. Sites provided key contacts for a deeper survey into the courses offered. Key informants that had been identified in the web searches were then all sent the same simple questions with a brief introduction over the email. The questions were:

- (1) *Are design students taught art history or do they have history and theory courses that are more design oriented?*
- (2) *Could you provide a list of lecture topics, assignments and courses that may have been tailored to meet the needs of design (as opposed to art) students?*
- (3) *Which of the courses have been the most successful and why?*

Eleven universities from the identified twenty-seven replied to the *Pandora* survey, constituting a 41% response.⁴ A dialogue was established with the eleven participating universities' representatives, transcriptions of which formed the basis for an appraisal of the national status quo of design history and theory in Australia. Working from this broad national base, individual lecturers were interviewed at the South Australian School of Art. These transcriptions were added to with comments from undergraduate and postgraduate students who took part in focus group discussions. Student responses from the formal course evaluation instrument of a design history and theory course called *Representing Visual Culture* were added to the student feedback section. Lastly a seminar on the relationship between design history and theory and industry was held to give participants in the research project an opportunity to speak out and to assist with drawing conclusions to the research.

Content and the canon –issues relating to traditional art historical pedagogy as a blueprint for teaching design content.

Although we are deep into an era of late postmodernism where one would assume that interdisciplinarity is commonplace, this is not the case. Design history and theory may be relatively established in the United Kingdom, North America and some European countries, but Australian universities that have been teaching design over the past decade have generally been doing so within the auspices of the visual arts. Art history long ago revised its canon to move away from the object, movement and hero-based approach but there is something peculiarly residual in the content of the canon, a residue that resists change. In a 2002 ACUADS paper Rosemary Hawker writes about '... the privileging of the canon in studio based art and design education.' Hawker says that 'The canon inevitably draws us toward discipline based courses. [and] It is ... curious that the institution of the canon is increasing its hold on the curriculum ...'.⁵

The canon provides a silent backbone to rely upon in art faculties that are taking on design components. Information provided by the majority of lecturers in design history and theory courses in the participating Australian universities indicate at least one course and generally as many as three courses that have evidence of the canon. Some indicate the debt that design history has to art history but most seem uncomfortable with courses that have not moved away from an art historical focus. These latter respondents indicate that change is taking place and courses are or are going to be revised to ensure that design receives more than 'lip service' in history and theory lectures.⁶

Opening Pandora's Paintbox reveals an overall absence of design heroism as a role model study for contemporary students. Content incorporated in design history courses that do not include obvious styles and periods of the canon such as Art Nouveau or The Bauhaus have pithy titles to lectures that reveal an inclusion of everyday ideologies and gripping new content that engages the 'now' with the 'then' in design history. For example in the second semester of the 1st year, Swinburne University introduces local material on Australian issues of indigenous, colonial experience and modernity with courses such as *Travel, Tourism and Comfort*. There appears to be a conscious and careful contextualisation of debate within a given time frame so that students are not lost in a thematic jungle. Social and gender identity are integrated into courses on *Redefinition* and *Commodification*, which then lead smoothly into the world of the *Soap Opera*. Projected postcolonial identity dichotomies are looked at in the *Primitive in Modern Art, The Cannibal in Asia Pacific* and interpretations of *Art Deco* and material culture. The thread of progression at Swinburne is successful as a result of a clever interlinking of theme and place. What is revealing in the arrangement of this content is the ingenious intermixing of the conventional and essential parts of design history and theory with a constant questioning of consumption and ideology.⁷

The University of New South Wales' Year 2 courses look at design history and theory from a variety of angles beginning with an emphasis on the link between theory and practice by using a case study from fashion and graphics. Issues that include pavilions, virtual gardens and Australian imagery are incorporated into both the 2nd and 3rd year, which builds upon the solid basis of the 1st year course. The University of

Western Sydney establishes a cultural context for the interpretation of print, screen, television, film, illustrative and multimedia design forms and introduces students to different theories of interpretation and reading/seeing design forms. The content of UWS emphasises social responsibility issues. The thrust of this and the other universities included in the report's section on 'dialogue' is towards integration as opposed to isolation.⁸

In this context the need to cater to international (and particularly Asian) design students both linguistically and culturally is a concern in design history and theory. Of the sixty-two 1st year international students enrolled in the South Australian School of Art in 2001, fifty-two were studying design and forty-two were from Asian countries.⁹ The Western bias of most courses in design history and theory provide a contextual barrier to Asia Pacific students and the terminology that is embedded in a lot of art and design history and theory is an additional obstacle to comprehension and learning. Academic and support staff in Australian universities facilitate the learning of such students in different ways; for example Swinburne University offers a separate stream of courses for 1st year international students in design history and theory, and the University of South Australia has additional tutorials.

Tensions between theory and practice and the academy and industry

The subtitle of *Opening Pandora's Paintbox* is 'Curriculum research into the history and theory of design in Australian universities' but it cannot be assumed that design history and design theory are the same thing. However a distinct separation of history and theory is damaging to design history because it suggests that history is not theorised. Design research that is being published in a number of international journals reveals different approaches with some favouring an engineering and scientific bias, others a marketing bias and many others historical, critical or educational approaches.¹⁰ The history and theory of design that is taught in Australian universities is taught to students who are pursuing professional design degrees. The research has no details of history and theory being taught to students training to become design historians although there is evidence that postgraduate *art* students choose design topics for their research degrees. Added to this, many lecturers teaching in the field of design history and theory have art history training.

Some of the participating universities and many others evidenced in the Appendix have been merging aspects of the arts with areas of study such as new media. There is a growing tendency to combine sound and movement with the previously static and silent areas of 2-D and 3-D design. Animation, film/video, music and dance are evolving into an area of design that defies definition. Previously discrete disciplines now have difficulty fitting into the environment of the academies. But changes in universities are impeded by heavy staff workloads. The research reveals a strong undercurrent of stress amongst academics who know that courses need to be revised to incorporate new content and to be relevant to practice and research but they are not given adequate assistance to meet these demands.

An academy, that is the sandstone university of old learning, has traditionally concerned itself with a rarefied form of knowledge, but the last twenty years have witnessed a growth of new universities that concentrate more on the application of knowledge in the professional world. It is in these universities that design finds a more suitable home because of design's inherent connection with industry. However design programmes are sometimes split between different schools with an uneasy relationships between programmes that do not share the same ethos but for political reasons are in the same school. Structural changes in universities occur above the level of academic staff and as such there are histories of hard work in building up certain departments that can be lost in the process of rationalising change. Staff at various universities emphasise that the success of particular theory courses is often dependent on the *person* presenting.

Design's origins in industry and commerce and its continued relationship with production and consumption earn it a legitimacy in universities that are building stronger alliances with the world of business. While the practice of design needs no justification for relevance in this area, this is not the case with the theory of design. A seminar on the relationship between design theory and practice was held in Adelaide in March 2002 as part of *Opening Pandora's Paintbox*.¹¹ The diversity of the papers offered and the heated but lively debate that took place in the panel discussion is an appropriate illustration of some of the issues that have come out of *Opening Pandora's Paintbox*. It was eminently clear that the views of lecturers in the history and theory of design and those exclusively involved in industry and the studio practice of design are

different and even opposing at times. Interestingly though, the tensions between industry and academia seem to be less than those that exist within the academy itself. There are unresolved issues surrounding the definitions and purpose of art, craft and design. Territoriality is very much alive in the midst of merging mediums and interdisciplinarity. Denise Whitehouse said

What I would like to ask is could it be that to some extent the tussle over relevance is underpinned by what I like to call the 'clash of intellects', that is the clash between the intuitive and visual, and the intellect and verbal that underpinned modernist pedagogy and has long dominated design thinking and education?¹²

The panel discussion revealed that communication and understanding is lacking between studio and theory staff in some universities and that this is often fuelled by informal discussions that take place with students in the studio. Interviews with studio staff at the University of South Australia regarding the interface between history, theory and practice, range from a belief that studio staff should give history and theory tutorials and lectures to firm opinions that 'it is not appropriate for studio staff to give theory lectures'.¹³

At this point art theory and design theory share in the dilemma of 'relevance'. In a 2002 ACUADS paper Rosemary Hawker warns that art theory is losing sight of its own disciplinarity as courses focus more and more upon marketing, visual promotion and technology.¹⁴ There is a tendency towards a shallow involvement in theoretical discourse and this poses a danger of an anti-intellectualisation of theory, which is particularly true in design. If design theory courses and assessment tasks include terms that seem abstruse because they emanate from critical theory and philosophy, there is inevitable resistance because design and particularly graphic design is seen to be part of the furiously fast-moving world of consumer satisfaction. The notorious marketing concept 'KISS' (keep it simple, stupid) is all too often a silent requisite in the dumbing down of design theory. A move away from thematic theory courses towards industry and market-based courses caters to the university as a corporate body with students as its clients.

If art history and theory departments are being shifted into History or English departments after decades of independent strength, what is the future of a discrete and distinct identity for design history and theory? *Opening Pandora's Paintbox* reveals differing points of view on the disciplinarity of design history and theory. Peter McNeil from UNSW challenges that '... "design history" must continue to occupy an interdisciplinary position or risk becoming another orthodoxy'.¹⁵ Denise Whitehouse acknowledges that design needs its own history and theory but that this theory

... need not be oppositional to studio thinking. It can work to develop complimentary skills while providing the necessary historical and cultural context for design practice, teaching history into the studio and in parallel is not easy. It is however only through venturing into the studio that the historian learns the difference between design thinking and academic thinking.¹⁶

The students' point of view

The responses of students from the South Australian School of Art provide a concentrated sample that represent a students' point of view.¹⁷ The general opinion of graphic design and illustration students is that theory courses should fulfil their requirements to enter industry by providing them with a range of theoretical ideas and a conscience about ethical issues. Students fail to see the relevance of most theory courses in their study to become designers and tend to judge courses according to their perceptions of industry.¹⁸ When referring to specifics in courses, students want courses to contextualise the content and they also support chronology. One student said: 'I really like time-lines ... there is not enough plugging in and out of time lines so that you can grasp what is going on.'¹⁹ The responses also indicate that students balance a number of things including paid employment with their studies; this showed in marked dissatisfaction with lecture and/or tutorial times. Students also appear to be easily bored unless there is lively engagement, plenty of relevant pictures and slow, easy explanations. Students are resistant to writing long essays and require teaching material to relate to assessment tasks at all times. While responses in the quantitative section of a 1st year course indicate a positive attitude (70.4%) to the course in general, written comments and interview transcripts indicate they are tired of theory after their experiences in Year 12 and 'just want to be creative'.²⁰ Students also enjoy courses when the personality of the lecturer shines through the anonymous facade of so much of university study.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to point out some of the elements that were revealed in the opening of *Pandora's Paintbox*. The topics of courses listed in the first part of the paper indicate a strong impetus to ensure a depth of theoretical content in the face of a growing corporatisation of university education. Unlike the jar in Ancient Greek mythology, *Opening Pandora's Paintbox* did not set out to cause trouble but to identify the troubles and seek solutions. In the myth, the jar was not completely emptied, *hope* remained, and in reality *Pandora's Paintbox* has revealed a mixture of mediums and methods that needed to escape containment. What remained as a constant throughout the research was a genuine underpinning of positivity (hope?) on the part of contributing universities about the future of design history and theory. It is clear that there is a group of committed academics across the Australian universities who identify with this new discipline and will ensure its continued growth and strength. Therefore any move away from areas of specialisation to flexible but shallow courses will result in an anonymous and depersonalised teaching environment. For design history and theory to be relevant to students in Australian universities, and beyond, it needs to help students to think deeply, design creatively and act responsibly.

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- ¹ Illustration by SASA Visual Communication Honours Students: Qudsia Ahmed, Naomi Fry and Mandy Hoemakers (2002).
 - ² The initiator of the research was Catherine Speck, supported by Ian North and Noel Frankham (then Head of the South Australian School of Art). Kathleen Connellan (author) was appointed as research associate, who after initial supervision from Catherine Speck, conducted the research and wrote the report from January 2001 to March 2002.
 - ³ For a comprehensive review of the myth and its representation in the arts, see: Dora and Erwin Panofsky, *Pandora's Box: the changing aspects of a mythical symbol* (New York: Pantheon, Bollingen series, 1956).
 - ⁴ Twenty-seven universities either have art and design history theory or just design history and theory courses according to information on the web. The remainder have related courses but do not specifically use the term 'design or art history and theory'. These include media, communication and cultural studies, details of these are in the Appendix, which is a print-out from the web material in mid-2001.
 - ⁵ Hawker, Rosemary. 'The disciplining of art theory: selling sameness.' Paper presented as part of the conference De-Skilling Re-Skilling at the annual meeting of the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS), Brisbane, Queensland, 3-5 October 2002, 5.
 - ⁶ *Opening Pandora's Paintbox: curriculum research into history and theory of design in Australian universities*, (Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2002), 26 & 32.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*, Swinburne University: 11-17.
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*, UWS:17-21 and UNSW: 26 –31.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, International student' problems and solutions: 55-59.
 - ¹⁰ Journals such as *Design Issues*, *The Journal of Art and Design Education*, *Design Research* and *The Journal of Design History*.
 - ¹¹ 'Professional Development Seminar', *Opening Pandora's Paintbox: curriculum research into history and theory of design in Australian universities*, (Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2002), 132 –164.
 - ¹² *Opening Pandora's Paintbox: curriculum research into history and theory of design in Australian universities*, (Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2002), 144.
 - ¹³ *Ibid*: Interviews: 102 & 122.
 - ¹⁴ Hawker, Rosemary. 'The disciplining of art theory: selling sameness.' Paper presented as part of the conference De-Skilling Re-Skilling at the annual meeting of the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS), Brisbane, Queensland, 3-5 October 2002, 1.
 - ¹⁵ Peter McNeil, 'Rarely Looking In: The Writing of Australian Design History, c.1900-1990', *Journal of Australian Studies*, #44, March 1995, pp.48-63.
 - ¹⁶ *Opening Pandora's Paintbox: curriculum research into history and theory of design in Australian universities*, (Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2002), 11 & 152.
 - ¹⁷ 1st year, 3rd year and Honours year Visual Communication students.
 - ¹⁸ In addressing the school board of the South Australian School of Art, the Pro Vice Chancellor, Michael Rowan said that there is a negative correlation between student evaluation scores (CEQs) and employment rates, for example students may criticise several courses in their programme but still gain

employment. Michael Rowan said that 'People [students] are satisfied in relation to their expectations and not in relation to their experiences'. Notes taken at the School Board, 18 June 2003.

¹⁹ *Opening Pandora's Paintbox: curriculum research into history and theory of design in Australian universities*, (Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2002), 62.

²⁰ Ibid.