

# The exhibition catalogue as an editorial design object

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## ABSTRACT

In the field of communication design, editorial design is one of the most relevant areas and, in this context, exhibition catalogues are prominent publications. Generally, these are medium or large format books, intended to perpetuate the information present in the (ephemeral) exhibitions to which they relate. So, they require great care in the design and graphic production process. In this article, we consider exhibition catalogues, aiming to identify their main characteristics and understand how they evolved over time. To achieve this, we base our study on bibliographic research, on the analysis of catalogues from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation – a reference institution in the Portuguese cultural panorama – and on interviews with experts in the field.

**Keywords:** Editorial Design, Book Design, Exhibition Catalogue, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Portugal)

## 1. EDITORIAL DESIGN

“Designers are to books what architects are to buildings. Designers write specifications for making books just as architects write them for constructing buildings. Even the most seemingly mundane detail needs to be decided, and it is just these tiny particulars that make a design successful.” (Hendel, 1998, p. 33)

According to Hochuli and Kinross (2003, p. 32), editorial design must take into consideration three main aspects: one related to format, proportions, and typography (factors that are closely related and condition each other), another aspect related to materials (papers and binding materials) and another related to reproduction (printing and finishing). All these factors are important and contribute to create the “total design” object that a book is intended to be. The first set of factors (format, proportions, and typography) is the one in which the designer intervenes first and which, according to Hochuli, corresponds to macro-typography – linked to layout – and micro-typography – linked to detail aspects.

### 1.1. Macrotypography

Macrotypography is related to the format, the size, the position of text columns and illustrations, the hierarchy of headings, subheadings, captions and, therefore, it concerns the typographic layout (Hochuli, 2009, p. 7).

In the creation of an editorial design object, the format is one of the first factors to define and this definition is closely dependent and related to several aspects.

“The book as a usable object is determined by the human hand and the human eye.” (Hochuli and Kinross, 2003, p. 36).

Human ergonomic constraints establish the limits for the shape of books, regarding format, thickness, and weight. But even with constraints, there are almost infinite possibilities when defining the format. Generally, this infinity is limited by some factors, such as the purpose of the work, certain traditions or influences and constraints inherent to paper formats, printing, and production, which limit and determine the specific format of each work. A book may have a landscape, portrait, square or irregular format (in experimental works). Over time, several studies have been made about the most pleasing proportions that books can assume.

“The format of the book determines the external proportions of the page; the grid determines the internal divisions of the page; and the layout determines the position of the elements. The use of a grid gives a book consistency, making the whole form coherent. Designers who use grids believe that this visual coherence enables the reader to focus on content rather than form.” (Haslam, 2006, p. 42).

“(…) there are considerations that precede the planning of details: the purpose of the book, the readership envisaged, and handleability – size and weight” (Hochuli and Kinross, 2003, p. 42).

Regarding the interior of the editorial object and the organization of the graphic elements, we must consider the type of information to be conveyed. An editorial work can be read continuous or selectively, and the type of reading determines the layout,

i.e., the information structure. A novel implies continuous reading, and its layout should be made to make this experience as easy and comfortable as possible<sup>1</sup>. A catalogue can be consulted, and the reader can select the information he wants to obtain. This is a much more complex type of work, with more differentiated levels of information, so its organisation requires some expertise. Besides the rules of readability, hierarchies of information and a system of “navigation” through the work must be established. Thus, it is common to have elements which are quite different from one another, with different formatting to make the hierarchies easily understood: headings, subheadings, body of text, quotations, notes, and captions are some examples. To aid navigation through the work, there are also elements such as running heads (or running foots), page numbers, separators, or chapter entrance pages.

It is in this context that we can speak about the grid as a tool to establish limits to the infinity of options that can be taken in the creation of each page of an editorial design object. It constitutes a resource that guarantees the designer a defined framework and contributes to the overall visual homogeneity (Darricau, 2004, p. 63).

The most basic grid systems determine the margins, the proportions of the print area, the number, width and length of columns and the spaces between them. More complex grid systems define the baseline grid on which the typography sits and may define the dimensions of the images, as well as the position of headings, footnotes, etc. (Haslam, 2006, p. 42).

It was in the 20th century, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly through Jan Tschichold<sup>2</sup> and Josef Müller-Brockmann, that the grid developed and became widespread as a means of providing rational and objective management of the layout. These developments brought major changes and more complex and flexible grids, which came to allow multiple combinations. The regular (single) type area, which was the usual, until then, did not disappear and continued to be used in continuous text works. However, the modern grid has spread widely throughout publishing activity (Darricau, 2004, p. 64).

Generally, the creation of a grid intended to display images and texts begins by dividing the width of the text into a certain number of equal columns, with the necessary space between them. Vertically, the space is measured in lines of text (including the space between lines). The height of the text area contains the totality of these portions, with gaps between them.

Finally, we must remark that a grid should not act as a restrictive and disabling element. Whenever the material to display on the pages does not fit into the grid, exceptions can and should be made and we can deliberately “disregard” it to enhance the final result of the work.

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<sup>1</sup> To achieve this, several ergonomic studies have been developed throughout the 20th century, concluding that a normal text should have 55 to 80 characters.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Tschichold devoted several years to the detailed study of medieval and Renaissance book manuscripts to better understand their structure (Hurlburt, 1978, pp. 71-72).

## 1.2. Microtypography

“You may not be able to tell a book by its cover, but you can tell a book design by its copyright page.” (Hendel, 1998 p. 33)

Microtypography relates to the individual components within a layout: letters, letter spacing, words, word spacing, lines, leading and text columns.

Hochuli clarifies that in the context of works containing a considerable amount of text (such as books), when we speak of formal aspects, we do not speak of aesthetic aspects in the sense of freedom or personal taste, but rather of aspects that provide the best possible reception of the text, and thus of aspects related to readability. Thus, in microtypography, formal elements have more to do with aspects related to the physiology of the human eye than with personal preferences. He also states that aspects of microtypography are often neglected by graphic designers (and typographers), since they go beyond the core of what is normally considered “creative” (Hochuli, 2009, p. 7).

## 1.3. The cover and the dust jacket

Following the idea that in a publication all factors contribute to the overall communication, we cannot fail to mention the fundamental element that is the cover. There are various types of covers that must be considered. In hardback books, we have a rigid type of cover, usually coated with cloth, leather or paper. It may have the publication title engraved or printed on it, and is often covered by a dust jacket, which frequently presents more graphic elements than the inside cover. The cover is connected to the inside by the endpapers, which may also contain ornamental motifs. In softback books we have another type of cover – usually made of printed cardboard, which may or may not have flaps. It is glued to the inside of the book, and, in this case, there are no endpapers. This kind of cover may also have a dust jacket. In these cases, it is more common for the dust jacket to repeat the graphics of the cover. There are also cases in which the cover is not printed, and the graphics are only present on the dust jacket.

The dust jacket had a purely functional origin to provide protection, but over time it has taken on a role increasingly linked to the communication design. It is seen as an advertising support for the book, as an information vehicle and also as a way to “give voice” to the interior of the work.

It must be recalled that a cover is always constituted by a spine and a back cover. Whenever the width of the spine allows, it is usual to display the title (and other information such as the author and publisher) of the work, to allow the identification of the book when it is on a shelf, for example.

## 1.4. Symmetry and movement

“(…) A page is never just a page. It is the one that was before and the one that comes next. Our gaze and our brain synthesise the information and there is a harmony that is felt when we leaf through a book (…)” (Ceia, 2015).

There is an aspect that conditions the whole design of a book and is always inherent to it, which is the fact that it develops in sets of two pages. Thus, any typographic approach, even if asymmetrical, must always consider this symmetry inherent to the book as a physical object (Hochuli and Kinross, 2003, p. 35). It must also contemplate the fact that the visual “weight” of the two pages side by side is not equal, with the eyes always tending to move to the right-hand page of the open book. Due to these determining factors, editorial design is always different from the design of objects that only consider a single sheet at a time, such as posters, for example.

Another inherent aspect of any editorial design object, which conditions its conception, is the sense of movement and development of the work, given by the turning of the pages. As we have seen, in an editorial design object it is always important to consider the unity formed by the spreads, and not each page individually. However, the movement given by the turning of pages, which forces us to observe consecutive sets of two pages, leads Hochuli and Kinross (2003, p. 35) to consider that, to establish typographic harmony, it is important to consider the entire set of double pages.

Hochuli and Kinross also state that this succession of double pages also includes a temporal dimension, and, in this sense, the function of the book designer is, in a broad sense, the resolution of a problem of space and time.

## 1.5. Total Design Object

“(…) all the parts of a book should rest equally on a unified plan, so that the same elements are treated in the same way, from the first to the last page. This is not just an aesthetic demand but is also important for an understanding of the text.” (Hochuli and Kinross, 2003, p. 108).

In conclusion, and according to Hochuli and Kinross (2003, p. 108), a book is a total design object (and we would add that any graphic object is). Headings, subheadings, the white space after a title or the leading are elements that communicate in that design object. And in the same way, in a book, the cover and the dust jacket are part of that whole, just like colours and materials: the tone of the paper, the colours of the endpapers, the binding material, the ribbon, the colours of the cover, the print quality. Everything contributes to the overall feeling that the design object conveys.

## **2. PARTICULARITIES OF EXHIBITION CATALOGUES**

A catalogue is, by definition, “(...) a list of works of art in an exhibition or collection, with detailed comments and explanations (...)” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020). It is a book that collects a list of works from a particular exhibition and a set of texts that complement that exhibition and make it last beyond its presentation. It is a work in which all the aspects listed in chapter 1 are noted, but which presents some particularities.

José Brandão (b. 1944), a remarkable Portuguese communication designer, states that “catalogues are no longer a consequence of the exhibition, but rather the history or the context of the artist, and the reproduction of most of the things that are in the exhibition, while at the same time explaining more”. In other words, nowadays this type of book is much more documented, ending up being a “(...) cultural complement to what you are seeing” (Brandão, 2020).

Fernanda Cavalheiro (b. 1995), a young communication designer dedicated to cultural design (working at Overshoot Design), states that the exhibition catalogue has become a much more appealing and intellectual object, turning into the most important thing that remains of the exhibition, since “(...) it allows continuity (...), after the exhibition is over”. The public ends up being interested in this type of book because it constitutes a physical memory of the event. “(...) Visitors go to the exhibition and want to know more than what is in the captions or in the texts, (...) it is always good to have a catalogue, something physical, (...)” it is the “(...) culmination of the exhibition (...)” (Cavalheiro, 2020).

One of the most important and interesting particularities of catalogues is the connection to the exhibition they represent, since there must be a graphic relationship between these two realities, despite the existence of “(...) a certain autonomy” (Brandão, 2020). This graphic relationship can be transmitted through, for example, the use of the same fonts, the same colours, the same text formatting, etc., always trying to maintain a coherence between all the elements. For this reason, the creation of the exhibition graphic concept should also consider the needs of the catalogue.

The exhibition catalogue is a type of book in which research is communicated, but which is also illustrative, and therefore its design must be capable of connecting both aspects, trying that the result doesn't seem too boring nor just a gallery of images. Since one of the main objectives of this kind of publication is the dissemination of exhibition works, the quality of image reproduction is of utmost importance and, because of that, graphic production tasks also assume a decisive role.

## **3. CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION EXHIBITION CATALOGUES**

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF) is a Portuguese institution created in 1956 that is known for its support to the cultural scene, namely in the fields of fine

arts, music and science, among others. It is an institution where various exhibitions take place and, therefore, the catalogue is a very important object.

In the master's research "Design de catálogos de exposição: o caso da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian" (Nunes, 2020), 31 catalogues of the foundation are analysed<sup>3</sup>, since its origins (1956) until 2019, which allows us to have a comprehensive view this medium evolution.

One of the first aspects to be mentioned has to do with quality – a characteristic that has always led the work of the institution. As José Brandão states, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation there has always been "(...) the extreme taste (...) in doing things well (...)", that is, even in the early days of the foundation, designers such as Sebastião Rodrigues had left "(...) a strong tradition of well-done things (...)" (Brandão, 2020).

Nevertheless, the decades of analysed work allowed us to observe a notable evolution of the exhibition catalogues, as a means of divulgation.

Firstly, we could notice a clear diversity of formats, which varied from catalogue to catalogue, depending on the designer who created it, but in more recent catalogues this is less the case, as they present more uniform formats.

We also noticed that the print run has changed over the years. Currently, the number of copies is considerably smaller than in the first catalogues analysed. This is directly related to the technological advances in printing techniques, which nowadays allow a reduced print run for a reasonable price, unlike what happened in the 1960s.

The medium and the material are two aspects that we consider having accompanied the technological evolution. For example, the quality of the paper has improved significantly compared to the papers used in the first catalogues, which were more porous and rigid. Nowadays, they are softer, thinner and allow a better quality in the reproduction of images.

As far as printing is concerned, we can observe an evolution from poor-quality to a more evolved printing. The finishes remain practically unchanged, showing no significant evolution.

Regarding the structure, we can say that the catalogue has evolved in terms of content, which is naturally reflected in the graphic aspects. As Carla Paulino (2020) (coordinator of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation divulgation department) states, "when we analyse the first CGF exhibition catalogues, we realise that they lacked content, and only focused on identifying the piece of art in the exhibition, being a kind of itinerary of the exhibition itself". With greater and more complex content, the editorial grid is now more careful and coherent.

Regarding typography, we observe that the fonts used follow the rules of readability and that the hierarchy of the various typographic elements used to distinguish information allows coherent and structured texts.

Iconography is one of the main elements of an exhibition catalogue since it allows the reproduction of pictures of the works representative of the subject on display. All the catalogues that have been analysed denote special attention to the quality of the images, even in the first decades when they were generally printed in rotogravure. Regarding colour, it should be noted that the first exhibition catalogues were printed

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3 Using the analysis model described in: Rolo, Elisabete (2018).

in black and white, with only the cover and one of the folios in colour. This no longer happens nowadays. The exhibition catalogue is printed in colour to reproduce the images as close to reality as possible.

## CONCLUSION

Generally, we can state that the exhibition catalogue is a kind of book whose content has evolved over the last few decades, moving from a simple vehicle of showpieces with their respective captions to a vehicle for research texts and reflections on the themes of the exhibition. It went from showing the main pieces on display to becoming an extension of the exhibition. This change in content was also reflected in the form, giving rise to more complex objects with richer and more variable structures, in which the hierarchy of information plays a decisive role. This evolution also occurred at the level of graphic production, as the technological means greatly evolved, enabling better printing quality and smaller print runs through digital printing. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation catalogues constitute an important corpus of objects that cover a long and rich period, so its analysis allows us to understand this evolution. However, despite all the progress, there is one aspect that remains unchanged – the fact that this work continues to be demanding, accurate and focused on quality.

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