

# IMITATION AND ITS LEGITIMATE USAGE IN GRAPHIC DESIGN FOUNDATION EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT:

Design has a long learning curve. This curve is awkwardly accommodated by the instructional schedule of most four-year degree programs in the United States. When a design school enrolls new students without a visual learning background, such a setting hurries new students and, ultimately, leaves them unable to face the academic challenges and competition in the workplace after graduation. Based on this situation, this paper will discuss the oft-neglected methods of imitation as effective learning tools to help offset the detriments of a hasty clip and propose integrating imitation vigorously into college level design foundation study.

The first portion of this paper will concern itself with literature review, the purpose of which is to introduce imitation, supported by the evidences as applied to English and fine art study, to demonstrate its significant value that contributes similarly to graphic design foundation study. After the literature review, some learning issues observed from teaching design foundation will be discussed for the purpose to suggest integrating imitation as learning methods to supplement foundation design learning process. The learning issues include the cases that new students lack effective observation skills that are necessary to develop a productive learning based on visual observation and the graphic skills needed for visually speaking their creative mind. After introducing the imitation method, the analysis will demonstrate how imitation plays a positive role in foundation design, activating visual graphic perception, providing guidance and acquisition of graphic skills. In addition, some controversial concerns will be mentioned and discussed as well.

## INTRODUCTION

When I was in junior high school in China, I took an after-school art class to improve my foundation skills, hoping one day I could get into a fine arts academy to pursue my creative dream. In the class, one of the students came to my notice, for the student, with hardly any art training background, made a remarkable progress in demonstrating his art foundation skills through his work in a fairly short time. Since the learning curve of art study is relatively long, which assumes the need for constant practice, such 'quick' progress in this student's work was a mystery to me. When I found out that the student intensively imitated some of the master's work in detail, and used this imitation experience to guide him to reach good results in other practices, I was shocked. I never thought imitating art works could help one's art skills grow so quickly.

As a matter of fact however, serving as a learning method, imitation has been applied in different study areas to solve specific learning problems. For example, in *The English Journal*, Scott Shields introduces how he cultivates students' original writing skills based on an imitative writing exercise. According to Scott, the exercise is effective as he has discovered that imitating great literature works invites more original imagination from students, simply for the reason that students will have less pressure from seeking compositional formatting (Shields 2007, 56). Likewise, the same principle is utilized in the visual art study as well. In European art academies, imitation was considered as the base for the "core of academic method", even before the industrial revolution (Efland, 1983, 150). As Efland describes, novices in old fashion art academies learned their drawing skills by "copying engravings or drawings of the masters". Apparently, it is a typical picture of taking imitation as a learning method for beginners, yet it is not a unique case in visual art history. More than one thousand years ago, imitation in Chinese art was also believed one of the essential ways to acquire painting skills. The Chinese art theory "Six Essentials" or sometimes referred to as "Six Principles of Painting," (edited by Hsieh-Ho, 479-502 AC) suggests that "following and copying" (Chiang Yee 1964, 32) is one of six fundamental learning methods to develop painting skills. Many Chinese artists subscribe to this theory and continue to imitate masterpieces as a learning experience.



Figure 1

Left: Zhang Daqian, a well-known Chinese art master, was duplicating a mural painting for study purpose between 1941 to 1943 in Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang City, Gansu Province, China.

Image source: <http://www.ccbi.com.cn/article/class138/class456/200606/2537.htm>

Right: Chang Shuhong, Chinese artist, the Head of Dunhuang Cultural Relic Research Institute, was copying the mural painting at Mogao Grottoes in 1978.

Image source: [http://news.fjnet.com/whys/whysnr/200804/t20080425\\_68790.htm](http://news.fjnet.com/whys/whysnr/200804/t20080425_68790.htm)

Mogao Grottoes, a historical remains of Buddhism relic located in Gansu province of China, is known for reserving many ancient mural paintings. It has become routine nowadays for Chinese artists, educators and college art students to visit the Grottoes, studying the masterpieces in the manner of imitating, to pursue more matured painting skills and to absorb artistic sustenance from aesthetic progenitors.

The use of imitation as a learning method, typically when applied in the visual art study, is enlightening to graphic design training, since both visual realms, in foundation level, have a comprehensive connection. It is true as is often the case - many visual artists and designers can easily switch their role depending on the nature and the ultimate purpose of the visual project (Schroeder 2005). However, the value of imitation in graphic design foundation study seems not have been well emphasized to a point. Maybe it is because that imitation raises hackles overly sensitive to issues such as copyright infringements, or perhaps it is perceived to be opposed to innovation and creativity. Despite the misgivings of some (whatever their basis), we cannot ignore the potential of imitation that leads to a productive learning in graphic design foundational, especially in the situation that four years in college are not even enough for students "to develop the [graphic

design] skills and foster the talents necessary to become a viable practitioner” (Heller 2005).

## ISSUES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN FOUNDATION CLASSES

When I taught design foundation courses and also served the Design Department as a Liaison, I interviewed all freshman and transfer students who are interested in graphic design major. I found each year, for some reason, many new students hardly received any formal visual foundation training before college. It seems very true that freshman design classes are often filled by those “natural-born artists’ encouraged by family and friends to follow their muse”, and/or those who “might be academically poor ‘underachievers’ for whom liberal arts holds little promise,” as posted on AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) official website by Steve Heller, a New York based design critic (Heller 2005). Facing those students who are new to graphic design, an instructor needs to input a great deal of time and effort in teaching design foundation. Admittedly, part of teaching the design foundation is to solve students’ learning problems.

### FOUNDATION STUDY ISSUE 1: LACK OF OBSERVATION SKILLS

“I can see the beauty of design samples when I look at them, but I don’t know how to carry over to my own design.”

At its heart, graphic design is visual communication. Despite its demand for intensive manual practice, it involves heavy observational activities indeed. In most design schools in the United States, showing visual examples in lectures and referring to design samples are considered canonical teaching methods, particularly during the early part of graphic design learning. The student’s statement from above is not an unusual case in foundation class critique. The problem is often caused by the student lacking a productive observation skill, strictly, a more ‘guided’, ‘active’ observation skill. An inactive observation often blinds students from seeing or perceiving graphic details, such as the characteristics of forms, counter forms, typographic minute details, spaces and so forth, in a given visual sample. As we understand in a typographic foundation study for instance, that it is the

“micro level of minute details [that] provides the base of how to perceive the big picture” (Timothy 2004, 14-15), neglecting the “micro level of minute details” is like missing the “building blocks” which compose the ultimate aesthetic architecture in the sample work as a whole. Without seeing the “building blocks”, it would be intangible for students to use graphic sample works as a visual guide to inspire a formal beauty in their own design practices.

That students overlook graphic details is not a mystery however. Many cognitive scientists (Perkins 1994, 16), behaviorists (Goldstone, Gerganov Landy, and Roberts 2009) and art educators (Efland 2002, 17) have discussed some related issues from different perspectives. Nelson Goodman, a researcher in cognition, perception, and visual art, provided us an interesting idea as follows:

“What and even whether we perceive depends heavily on our state of perceptual readiness. Habit, context, explicit instruction, interests, and suggestion of all kinds can blind or activate our perception, conceal or reveal a mountain or a molehill.” (Goodman 1984, 25)

It seems that the “perceptual readiness” in Goodman’s viewpoint is the key to decide what and how much one can see and perceive. If an intensive exercise for seeing or perceiving graphic details, is integrated into a design foundation study, students may soon “activate” their graphic perception and gain a sharper observation skill to notice visual details. One of the major differences between a seasoned designer and a fresh hand is that the seasoned designer with more visual experience can see much more with an expert’ eye. As “part of building expertise is to train the brain to ‘see’ problems through the eyes of an expert”(Clark 2008, 12), activating students the perception to better observe minute graphic details is crucial to make a fruitful learning during the early stage of graphic design study.

## ISSUE 2: LACKING GRAPHIC SKILLS

Possessing proficient graphic skills not only allows a designer the ease to visualize and present a creative idea on paper, but also encourages the designer to step out his/her comfort zone to explore a more diverse and challenging creative possibility. Free from the worry of lacking graphic skills, a designer can fully speak for his/her creative mind. In a logo mark design class, for example, students often have difficulties of visualizing their ideas on paper due to the nonproficiency of graphic skills, regardless of how creative and innovative their concepts are. The graphic forms in foundation learning classes are found often lacking of visual sophistication, either because the forms are created entirely based on an imagination, or because their sketches are too awkward to provide a good self-instruction for next step in refining process. Some students hesitate to attempt to new ideas because of the deficiency of graphic skills. Even after foundation training, some students still linger in a wandering land, having stumbled so long, lost, without direction.

In “process schools” where design research and design process are exclusively emphasized, students are expected to become graphically skillfull through a large amount of self experimentation along with their open-ended research. This process based method helps students acquire the necessary graphic skills, but suggests a long time accumulation. It seemingly encourages innovation as well. However, for new students in the early stage of design learning, overly relying on personal experimentation and stumbling in trial and error may cause a large amount of time wasted on aimless idling, which explains on a certain level why a four-year college is still too short for students to develop needed design skills to survive (Heller 2005).

## IMITATION, ITS USAGE IN GRAPHIC DESIGN FOUNDATION STUDY

### A. IMITATION ACTIVATES GRAPHIC PERCEPTION

Imitating graphic samples in design foundation training involves a heavy physical drawing activity, in which students trace model works using pen, ink and tracing papers. Gaspare De Fiore, design professor and the founder of UID (Union of Italian Design), asserts that drawing can be the “force to find characteristic shapes” (Gaspare 1984, 9). Similar to a drawing process, when

students trace graphic model works, their eyes must pick up graphic details and send signals to their brains which, in turn, guide their hands, moving precisely, to trace every small part of graphic shapes in the model work. This imitative process engages students with graphic details and helps them better perceive the ‘personality’ of shapes and spaces. The graphic model work appears in students’ eyes much fuller and detailed. The exercise found in the book *Design Drawing* provides another interesting evidence. In order to encourage a productive observation to the graphic details of letterforms, Francis Ching, an architecture and design professor at the University of Washington, suggests students turn letterforms upside down and trace contours of the letterforms. Turning the letterforms upside down is an effective way of minimizing the level of recognizing the identity of these letterforms. In addition to tracing the contour lines of the letterforms, the visual characteristics of the letterforms and the spaces would be well perceived. (Ching 1998, 27) (Figure 2).

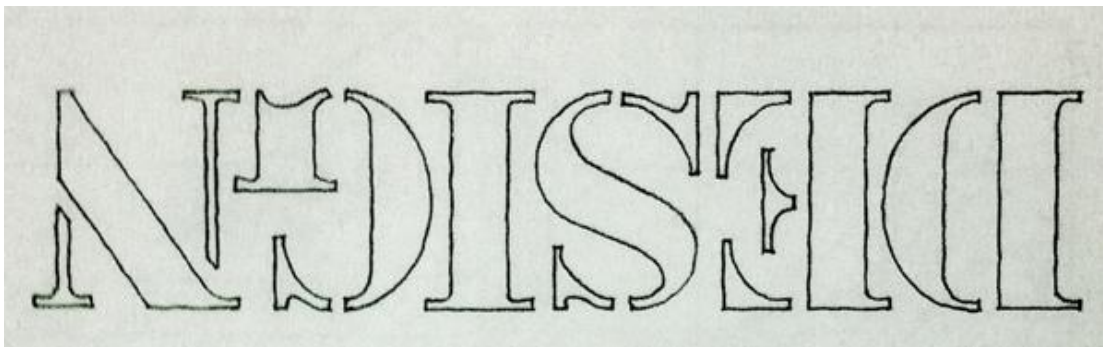


Figure 2. “Copy these letters shapes line by line using the guidelines provided. Drawing something upside-down compels us to be less concerned with its identity and more focused on the shapes of the contours and spaces we see.” (Ching 1998, 27)

An intensive tracing practice on selected models can stimulate brain constantly and force students to see the characteristics of shapes. It “activates” students’ perception of graphic details, to see the “micro world” of graphic forms. In other words, students can conduct an ‘active’ observation when referring visual samples after their graphic perception is activated. When the graphic details in the sample works are perceived, the outcome of the design learning through referring sample works in lecture classes will be more fruitful, since the design solution inspired by sample works would become more concrete and manageable due to a detail-driven observation.

## IMITATION ENHANCES STUDENTS GRAPHIC SKILLS

Not only can imitation improve students' active observation, but also enhance the student's graphic skills. As mentioned early, tracing model works is a heavy drawing practice. It involves motor cooperation not just between the eyes and the brain, but with the hand also. This imitation process, similar to any physical practice, trains students to control and coordinate their eyes and hand in the midst of tracing model works (typically these model works in the category of logo mark design). This physical process is perhaps where Marjory Wilsons draws the line by saying that "imitation of existing models is a major vehicle for the acquisition of graphic skills" (Golomb 1992, 326) and students appear more graphically proficient indeed, after an intensive imitation based practice is completed.

Often, the drawing or the illustration courses offered from art departments emphasize the romantic and narrative elements such as light, shadow, depth of field and shading textures that deliver a vivid visual pleasure. Instead, the design drawing is more rational and analytical. It often deals with the simplified forms with 2-D proportion, alignment and spacing (layout) etc. Tracing model works develop students a drawing style that deals with simplified forms with refined lines instead of expressive lines. This "design major related" drawing skill frees students from the embarrassment of not being able to visually represent their creative mind, which encourages an active pursuit of creative ideas in diversity. As many designers agreed, drawing itself is "a vehicle to invite creative ideas (Shaughnessy 2009, 28).

## BASIC IMITATION METHOD APPLICABLE IN GRAPHIC DESIGN FOUNDATION

In my design foundation class, imitation based practice has been utilized as one of viable learning methods in a form-driven study such as logo, identity as well as typographic foundation design. Students are asked to use traditional tools and materials including pencil, fine point pen, ruler, ink and tracing paper to manually trace or counter-draw the model works provided by instructor. (Figure 3)





Figure 3. Students are tracing & counter-drawing model works in a foundation class.

The selected model works should not be randomly chosen, but follow a certain consistency to assist the specific teaching need. For example, one of the assignments is to study positive and negative forms often applied in logo mark designs. To increase the awareness of the negative shapes interacting with positive shapes, I ask students to imitate a number of (10) model works that I have selected from portfolio books and online resources. The selected model works should demonstrate a successful application of the design principle - negative shapes interacting with positive shapes for retaining the message. Each logo mark has been resized to fit a three by three inch square and each logo tagline that provides a "hint" to see the negative shapes has been deleted to allow an active observation during the practice (figure 4).

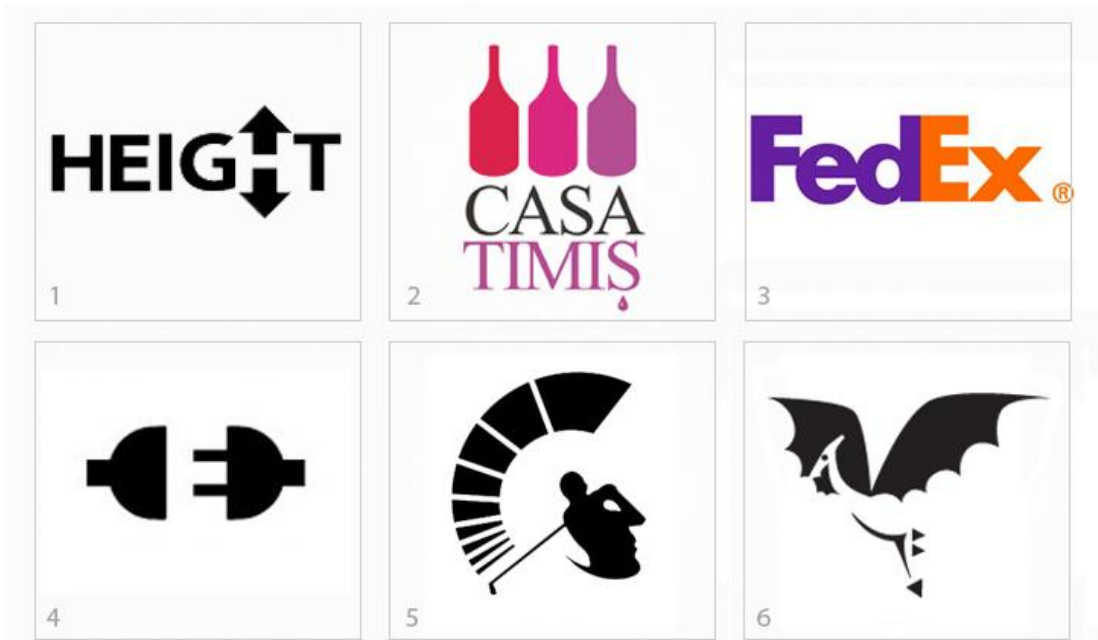


Figure 4. Some logo samples with positive and negative forms provided to students for this imitation based practice.

LOGO 1: Height - by Strizhart - <http://rayvellest.com/more-negative-space-in-logo-design>

LOGO 2: Casa Timis - by Alex Tass - <http://logopond.com>

LOGO 3: FedEx - by Lindon Leader - <http://logodesignerblog.com>

LOGO 4: ED's Electric - by Siah-Design - <http://logopond.com>

LOGO 5: Spartan Golf Club - by Richard Fonteneau - <http://creattica.com/logos/spartan-golf/30729>

LOGO 6: Fly Dragon Express - <http://www.logolounge.com>

(Images are selected from books and online resources only for education purpose.)

The requirements for this assignment are:

Fill ink in the positive shapes as it is on the original logo mark.

Trace the logo marks, filling ink only in the negative shapes / forms /space.

(reverse black and white, but no Photoshop allowed)

3 x 3 inch square

Black and white only

Imitating the model works appears effective in guiding students to see the details attentively in a slow tracing, especially when students trace the counter form by filling the negative space (often the "white space") with ink. They begin to genuinely notice something they otherwise would possibly overlook. Students are excited once these "hidden" forms are discovered. They are surprised as to how information can be embedded in a void, empty space to enrich the logo. Comparing to a common everyday observation which is less active, this imitation process engages students more effectively with negative and positive shapes and spaces through a manual practice.



Figure 5. Students share their imitation experience in a foundation class.

After the practice, students admit they have become more sensitive to this design principle, and consciously or subconsciously attempt to seek for and analyze positive and negative shapes interacting in a small logo mark anytime they see one. Apparently students become “perceptionally ready” to see and always be able to perceive the interplay of positive and negative shapes after this exercise, and continue to learn this principle from different visual resources beyond foundation classes.

Of course, this imitation based learning method can also be adjusted to solve other types of problems in design foundation studies. For example, by imitating different logo composition styles (stacked, lined, crest-alike etc.) students can raise and reinforce their awareness of the diversity of logo composition, as a way to prevent themselves from always starting a logo design solution with a “default setting”.

### CONTROVERSIAL – DIVERSE OR RESTRAINING

Some educators may disagree and criticize that imitating model works might restrain personal creativity or limit exploring new ideas in a long time, or

develop an inappropriate habit of taking imitation for the purpose of creative design. The criticism seems to make sense, as it might be true if imitation were to be used for the entire academic study. However, the fact is just the opposite. As a learning method that supplements design foundation training, imitation does not limit student's personal creativity, but frees students from the technical concerns and pressure, which encourages their pursuit of more creative ideas. Similar to the fact mentioned by Shields (2007) that many great English writers, before finding their own literary voices, often imitated some famous works during the early learning stage, many Chinese calligraphists usually began their training from imitating / tracing masterpiece, stroke by stroke. But it never became an obstacle for them to eventually establish their own personal styles and to become well-known masters with remarkable creative achievement. Imitation, as a learning method is not inherently plagiarism, neither is it necessarily against copyright, as it does not claim any authority. It is also not the antithesis of innovation. It is a valuable way of helping students develop a skillful observation and needed graphic skills before the challenge from the advanced design study. If it is applied in the graphic design foundation study, new students will soon find its significant value on their journey to academic success and a future career.

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