

## A MIDDLE HISTORY OF DESIGN: THE MEANING OF THE WORD IN THREE DICTIONARIES FROM THE 1600'S TO THE EARLY 1800'S::

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### One step back and two...

The Radical Designer has a concern about knowing what to be radical about. A few days ago a friend from Australia sent me the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. We have been discussing the meaning of several things namely Design at least for the past 6 years. I understand Ken Friedman's (the friend from Australia) faith in dictionaries. As the matter of fact, I also have a faith in dictionaries so I studied Design's definition in three different English dictionaries for a paper to be presented in Osaka for the 2008 ICDHS conference. Here follows the definitions of Design found in: Robert Cawdrey's *Alphabetic Table of Hard Words* (1604), Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1736) and Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) and finally the contemporary Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary.

In Robert Cawdrey's (1604) table of hard words we find:

“[fr] **deseigne**, (\* synonyms \*) an appointing how any;  
[fr] **deseignment**, thing shall be done. (\* synonyms end \*)  
[fr] **designe**, to mark out, or appoint for any purpose.  
(Cawdrey)

On the second dictionary, Nathan Bailey's “An Universal Etymological English Dictionary” printed for the first time in 1721 we find:

“**Desi`gn** [dessein, Fr. disegno, It. Desinio, Sp. Designatio, Lat.] 1. Intention, purpose, resolution, enterprise, or attempt. 2. Contrivance, project, scheme, plan of action. Is he a prudent man that lays designs only for a day? Tillotson. 3. A scheme formed to the detriment of another. A sedate settled design upon another man's life. Locke.

*Design [respecting arts and sciences] denotes the thought, plan and the geometrical representation of any thing.*

*Design [in painting] the first draught or sketch of a picture, or, in general, it is the thought that artist had about any great piece; whether the contours and out-lines, be only drawn, or whether the piece has the shadows, or the colours; so that if there appears much skill or judgment, it is common to say, the design's great and noble. In the designs of several Greek medals, one may often see the hand of an Apelles or Protogenes. Addison.*

*Design [in painting] is also used to signify the just measures, proportions and outward forms, which those objects ought to have, that are drawn in imitation of nature, and may be called a just imitation of nature.*

**To Design** [*designer, dessiner, Fr. Desegnare, It. Designàr, Sp. Of designo, Lat.*] 1. to draw a design of any thing, to plan, to form in idea. Observe whether it be well drawn, or, as most elegant artisans form it, well designed. Wotton." (Bailey)

The first American English dictionary marks the third period mentioned. In the Christian website from which we retrieved this information we learn that God dictated the dictionary to Noah Webster (probably as an ark for saving couples of words). We must also remember that Webster's is the ancestor of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary.

**DESIGN**, v.t.[L. To seal or stamp, that is, to set or throw.]

1. To delineate a form or figure by drawing the outline; to sketch; as in painting and other works of art.
2. To plan; to form an outline or representation of any thing. Hence,
3. To project; to form in idea, as a scheme. Hence,
4. To purpose or intend; as, a man designs to write an essay, or to study law.
5. To mark out by tokens.
6. To intend to apply or appropriate; with for; as, we design this ground for a garden, and that for a park. The word design may include an adapting or planning a thing for a purpose, or mere intention or scheme of the mind, which implies a plan. The father designs his son for the profession of the law, or for the ministry. It was formerly followed by to, but this use is now uncommon.

**DESIGN**, n.

1. A plan or representation of a thing by an outline; sketch; general view; first idea represented by visible lines; as in painting or architecture.
2. A scheme or plan in the mind. A wise man is distinguished by the judiciousness of his designs.
3. Purpose; intention; aim; implying a scheme or plan in the mind. It is my design to educate my son for the bar.
4. The idea or scheme intended to be expressed by an artist; as the designs of medals.

5. *In manufactories, the figures with which workmen enrich their stuffs, copied from painting or draughts.*

6. *In music, the invention and conduct of the subject; the disposition of every part, and the general order of the whole.*" (Webster, 1828)

On the contemporary Merriam-Webster Collegiate dictionary online:

Main Entry: <sup>1</sup>**de-sign**

Pronunciation: di-'zIn

Function: *verb*

Etymology: Middle English, to outline, indicate, mean, from Anglo-French & Medieval Latin; Anglo-French *designer* to designate, from Medieval Latin *designare*, from Latin, to mark out, from *de-* + *signare* to mark -more at SIGN

*transitive verb*

**1:** to create, fashion, execute, or construct according to plan: **DEVISE, CONTRIVE**

**2a:** to conceive and plan out in the mind <he *designed* the perfect crime> **b:** to have as a purpose: **INTEND** <she *designed* to excel in her studies> **c:** to devise for a specific function or end <a book *designed* primarily as a college textbook>

**3:** *archaic:* to indicate with a distinctive mark, sign, or name

**4a:** to make a drawing, pattern, or sketch of **b:** to draw the plans for <*design* a building> *intransitive verb*

**1:** to conceive or execute a plan

**2:** to draw, lay out, or prepare a design

Main Entry: <sup>2</sup>**design**

Function: *noun*

**1a:** a particular purpose held in view by an individual or group <he has ambitious *designs* for his son>

**b:** deliberate purposive planning <more by accident than *design*>

**2:** a mental project or scheme in which means to an end are laid down

**3a:** a deliberate undercover project or scheme: **PLOT**. **b:** *plural:* aggressive or evil intent - used with *on* or *against* <he has *designs* on the money>

**4:** a preliminary sketch or outline showing the main features of something to be executed <the *design* for the new stadium>

**5a:** an underlying scheme that governs functioning, developing, or unfolding: **PATTERN, MOTIF** <the general *design* of the epic> **b:** a plan or protocol for carrying out or accomplishing something (as a scientific experiment); *also:* the process of preparing this

**6:** the arrangement of elements or details in a product or work of art

**7:** a decorative pattern <a floral *design*>

**8:** the creative art of executing aesthetic or functional designs

**synonym** see INTENTION, PLAN

Notice the modifications on the hierarchy of meanings. Whilst Webster himself in the early 1800's thought that the main meaning of the noun Design was "a preliminary sketch or outline showing the main features of something to be executed" his followers think that this meaning is the fourth in hierarchy. We might add that in 1913 the main meaning was still the same as in 1828 (Webster, 1913).

Something to think about?

References:

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