

A New Blueprint – Does Design Have a Gender?

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By Fri Forjindam Bailey and Sam Lundquist

There's nothing more daunting than trying to categorize the influence of women on design. Women make up over 51 percent of the entire global population. They encompass many different roles from powerful consumers to influential producers of theories, products and ideas. Design is equally as complex. It covers a wide range of fields, ranging from illustration to architecture, graphic to technical and everything in between. It's not just design.

We at Thinkwell come from a unique place. As creators of guest experiences, we have the exciting opportunity to tap into all areas of design. A theme park project blends the skills of lighting, the innovation of technology, and the mastery of set design – all for the sake of an unprecedented storytelling experience. A museum exhibit requires a certain level of cultural sensitivity and the ability to walk in the guest's shoes. At Thinkwell, those shoes are filled by a variety of talented professionals.

"The most important part of being an artist in this industry is constant re-invention of self," says Cynthia Ignacio, a 20-year veteran artist and illustrator. Often being the only

woman in her workplace, her view of design excellence involves flexibility and a chameleon-like approach to each project, while always maintaining enthusiasm for her passion. "My bread and butter is designing science fiction and action-adventure environments, of a very architectural and industrial nature."

In a field thought to be dominated by men, that answer, although surprising is hardly unique. In our industry of immersive entertainment, legendary designers have and continue to leave their creative mark. Mary Blair, for example, is considered the artistic backbone behind such classics as Walt Disney's *Cinderella*, and *It's a Small World*. Women have always been an integral part of the design process. The only difference? Now we're hearing their voices.

"By not having [women's] ideas, design, stories or perspectives being told, you are missing out on half the world. That's just not good business," says Gwen Ballantyne, internationally renowned conceptual artist and illustrator. Her journey through the industry has reinforced the importance of visual storytelling as a collaborative and open-minded art form. Diversity in voice, idea and perspective: Together, they create a better product.

Women in design are not only the creative force behind many concepts, but serve as influential consumers as well. According to recent studies, by the year 2010, women will hold close to 60 percent

purchasing power in the US market. That's close to \$1 trillion. These statistics directly affect the business model for the many industries, not excluding design.

Cynthia Sharpe, Director of Exhibits at Thinkwell, knows the industry inside out and has seen the results of over two decades of change. She agrees that today, women bear the role of consultant as well as client, often addressing the work/life balance with strategic care and determination.

"Now we see women at the top of their game, able to step away for three years to raise young children, and then come right back at the CEO level," says Sharpe, who embodies this "work-at-home-mom" model herself. At Thinkwell, she holds the position of "voice on the phone," navigating the world of educational design from her home office in Kansas, thousands of miles from our headquarters in Burbank.

Parenting is just one aspect in the lives of many designers. From project management to community activism, engineering to motherhood, Susan Toler-Carr wears many hats. Ultimately, it's about talent, passion and perfecting your craft.

"Know your trade", says Carr who recalls the pressure of working primarily with other male architects and engineers. Now surrounded by women, she acknowledges the change in gender dynamic. Her quiet confidence and golden rule work ethic stems from a quote by NFL Official Burl Toler: "Show me a man who's never made a mistake and

I'll show you a man who's never made a decision." In 1965, Toler became the first African American official in any professional sport, breaking down cross-cultural and social barriers in his field. He also happens to be Carr's father, and it's only fitting that she would demonstrate such strong will, in any industry, regardless of gender.

At the end of day, it's not gender, class, sexuality, or race that creates great designers. It's ideas. In the paths of these four creative individuals, one thing is glaringly apparent: They are all driven by their love for storytelling and approach the concept of design in their own unique way. Being a woman is only one part of that equation.

"When we start to 'genderize' universal emotions like love, adventure, excitement, fear, or even our approaches to art, design, and storytelling, we do a disservice to women AND men, relegating each group to a set of outmoded stereotypes," says Ballantyne.

Design embodies countless disciplines and, at the same time, must embrace just as many contributing ideas and backgrounds – no matter where they come from. The only way that a lasting influence on the world of design can be felt or appreciated is by the collaboration of unique perspectives and a cohesive sense of passion.

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