

AD



The design in art and design issue

The National Society
for Education in Art
and Design magazine
Spring 2026
Issue 45

nsead

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Editorial

The last two years have seen a determined focus on clarifying the place of design within the curriculum, in anticipation of revisions to a national curriculum.

In part, this was driven by falling numbers in D&T and across arts subjects too, where art and design had been viewed as remaining broadly stable, despite anecdotal awareness that option numbers have fallen steadily for over a decade.

Thankfully, the Curriculum and Assessment Review confirmed the removal of the EBacc and acknowledged the need to reposition the arts within the curriculum. In reality, we know that art and design or D&T teachers involved in teaching GCSE D&T, have found it easier to use the art and design specifications of three-dimensional design, textile design and graphic communication. While this has had the positive effect of retaining these specialist specifications as viable options (when previously we had seen falling entries), it has reinforced some misconception of our GCSE numbers.

Over this period, NSEAD has been engaged in the national debate about design, working with

both the Design Council and DATA, the D&T Association to review design and its curriculum profile and societal perception. In contributing to the Curriculum Review, we have made the case for GCSE data not fully representing a true position. We established a Special Interest Group (SIG) for Design, which has updated our Big Landscape content and made the subject a priority for the coming years. In fact, we are grateful to several members of this SIG who have written articles especially for this edition. There is a real context here for us to respond to the continued growth of the Creative, Media and Design industries, alongside increasing emphasis on design in colleges of art and design, accounting for the vast majority of specialist degree titles offered.

Design is evolving rapidly with a need for greater sustainability and environmental awareness, but also in response to the challenge posed by the growing role AI will play in generative outcomes, design management and processes. It is also fair to say there has been a view amongst some that design is an exclusively

technical approach to the creation of products for manufacture, as in the D&T focus. There is that aspect, but at school level this risks removing imagination, creativity, critical thinking and a disconnection from the fundamental building blocks of the artistic elements and principles of design, all at the very heart of our art and design curriculum.

On page 2, Michele Gregson's interview with Simon Maidment, dean of Design, and Jane Knowles, dean of Art and Performance, both at UAL, remind us that our subject is Art and Design, and that art making and designing are inseparable. We are always designing as we arrange compositions, choose content and explore principles such as harmony, balance, pattern, rhythm and emphasis, which underpin all creative activity in our subject. ●

Ged Gast, Guest editor and chair of the NSEAD Design SIG
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Adam Simpson

Detail of the artwork for costume design at The Guildhall School of Music and Drama © Adam Simpson and The Guildhall School of Music and Drama, 2023

Cover: Summer school students working in B-made – The Bartlett workshops, UCL – in 2025 © Richard Stonehouse

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Opposite (top)

Adam Simpson's Royal Mail stamps

Opposite (below)*Girl at Music Festival* (c1999) by Adam Simpson

Adam Simpson: becoming an illustrator

Dr Iain Macdonald, vice president of NSEAD and associate professor in Design Innovation at Maynooth University, explores the work of illustrator Adam Simpson, whose practice encompasses both commissioned and self-initiated projects, most recently exemplified through a collaboration with the Royal Mail



Left
GCSE self portrait c1997

Design schools often complement graphic design courses with an illustration course. Although many students may be drawn to children's book illustration, there is a broader market in advertising, editorial work and data visualisation. Leicester-born illustrator Adam Simpson's recent collaboration with Royal Mail on a series of postage stamps themed around British myths and legends offers a compelling entry point into his creative world. These miniature artworks, rich in atmosphere and meaning, exemplify Simpson's ability to distil complex stories into iconic visuals that resonate across generations.

Royal Mail and the art of storytelling

Simpson describes the Royal Mail project as a 'dream' assignment, and one that offered both creative freedom and a rich narrative foundation. Tasked by graphic designer Jason Godfrey with illustrating eight legendary tales such as Beowulf and Grendel, the Loch Ness Monster, and the lesser-known British and Irish folklore figures of Grindylow, Blodeuwedd and Fionn mac Cumhaill, Simpson was challenged to evoke entire mythologies within the confines of a 35 x 35mm postage stamp. The result was a series of images that are not merely decorative but evocative, inviting viewers to explore the stories behind them.

What made this project particularly rewarding, Simpson notes, was the balance between structure and freedom. While Royal Mail provided textual references and historical context, Simpson was largely free to interpret the material visually. This allowed him to create artwork that was not only visually compelling but also emotionally and culturally resonant. The stamps were well received, sparking national pride and curiosity, and even led to school presentations where Simpson shared the stories and his creative process with children. Sticking a stamp on a physical postcard that pays for it to go anywhere across the globe still holds some magic for children brought up in a digital world.

The drawing process

At the heart of Simpson's work is drawing. His process begins with 'messy and scruffy' hand-drawn sketching. From this raw material, he gradually refines his ideas, tightening compositions but keeping the original textures until the final image emerges. He works on a larger format knowing that the illustrations will be produced as posters and viewed on digital screens as well as in miniature. Even when the end-product can appear clean and graphic, he retains a textured hand-drawn foundation.

He often includes small vignettes or hidden details that reward repeated viewing, adding depth and richness to the image. This approach reflects his belief that illustration should not only fulfil a brief but also offer something special and personal, a visual experience that lingers in the viewer's mind.

His process is also deeply iterative and exploratory. He allows himself the freedom to make mistakes, to procrastinate and to let ideas evolve organically. This openness to experimentation is not just a creative strategy but a philosophical stance – a belief in the value of wandering thought, of letting the mind play before it settles on a solution.

**Education and artistic formation**

Growing up, Simpson would sit in his bedroom drawing for hours, and at Wreake Valley Community College he was supported by encouraging teachers, such as visiting artist Geoff Beasley, and a creative classroom. For his A level Art at Gateway Sixth Form College, he used cheap Birus to crosshatch over blocks of watercolour on ambitiously large A0

'He allows himself the freedom to make mistakes, to procrastinate and to let ideas evolve organically'

mountboards (see *Girl at Music Festival*). He also took A level Design, which taught him the importance of working within briefs and solving visual problems – skills that would become central to his career.

He studied at Edinburgh College of Art, where he appreciated the creative freedom of the curriculum, and later at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the United States, where the structure was more intense and technically focused. This contrast proved invaluable. Forever curious, he considered himself as 'unfinished', and so a Masters at the

Royal College of Art enabled him to continue to ask questions through his work.

What makes a successful illustrator?

What makes Simpson so successful is foremost a passion for drawing, not just as a skill but as a way of thinking and problem-solving. Drawing is a tool for exploration, a means of understanding the world and expressing ideas.

Equally important is the ability to adapt and experiment, such as Simpson's recent foray into wood engraving and animation. This is crucial in a field

that is being challenged by generative AI.

Another key attribute is the ability to work independently while staying connected. Simpson has worked both in isolation and in shared studio spaces, learning to immerse himself in his work while also benefiting from creative communities.

Finally, Simpson underscores the importance of self-belief and resilience. Coming from a non-artistic background, he had to navigate uncertainty and self-doubt. Recognition, such as being selected for a national award during his A levels, helped build his confidence.

Adam Simpson's work is a testament to the power of illustration as a form of storytelling, exploration and cultural connection. Whether designing stamps that celebrate British folklore or experimenting with new media in his studio, Simpson approaches each project with a blend of technical skill, narrative sensitivity and creative curiosity. It shows that success comes about not just through talent, but with persistence, openness and a deep love for the process of making. ●

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