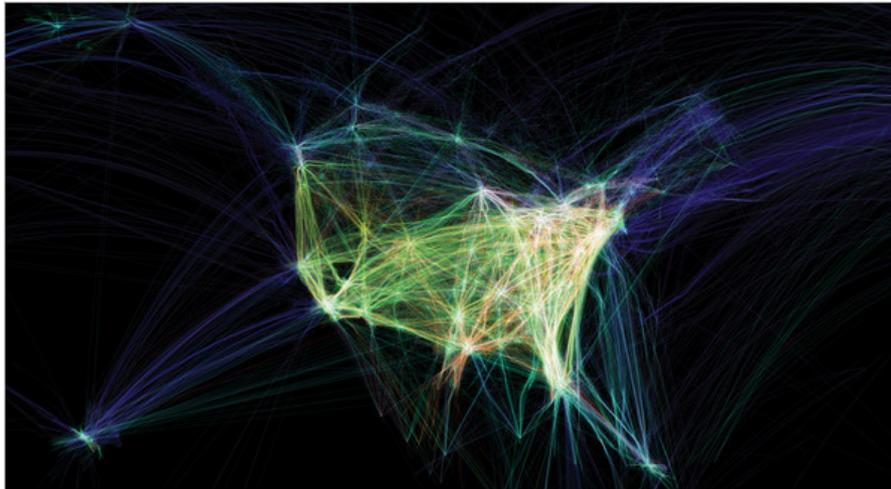


London portrays past and future of digital art

Alice Rawsthorn



Victoria & Albert Museum - Aaron Koblin's "Flight Patterns" shows a real-time image of the aircraft flight paths over the United States.

When the security guards first spotted a kid working on the computers in a laboratory at Liverpool John Moores University in the late 1980s, they demanded to know what he was doing there. He explained that one of the teachers had given him permission to hone his programming skills on the machines.

Good call. Daniel Brown, now 32, is one of the world's leading digital designers whose latest work, a luscious replica of tropical greenery, marks the entrance to "Decode: Digital Design Sensations," an exhibition of digital art and design that opened Tuesday at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Equally spectacular pieces by other designers are featured in the show, as well as dazzling examples of data visualization, the new medium that translates complex information into gorgeous — and easily understandable — digital images.

A short walk along the V&A's corridors, a smaller exhibition shows how far, and how fast, these technologies have come. "Digital Pioneers" is a selection from the museum's collection of early computer-generated imagery produced from the 1950s onward by the forerunners of the "Decode" designers, including Mr. Brown's father, Paul, who was experimenting with computer art years before his son started sneaking into the local university lab. Compellingly simple and made with rudimentary technology, much of the work in "Digital Pioneers" is astonishingly beautiful and seems both brave and prescient given the extreme sophistication of "Decode."

At a time when more and more of the images we see every day are digital, "Decode" and "Digital Pioneers" offer a welcome opportunity to help us understand how this area of design has developed, and is likely to evolve in future. "For the last 10 or 15 years this has been a very geeky field, but now more and more people are aware of the technology, and of how digital imagery is encroaching upon their lives," said Shane Walter, creative director of the digital art and design festival, onedotzero, and co-curator of "Decode."

This area has been so geeky that the first examples of computer art to be acquired by the V&A — a series of lithographs produced for "Cybernetic Serendipity," a groundbreaking 1969 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London — were originally classified as "prints" by the museum's curators. The V&A has now recategorized them and acquired more work to create one of the world's largest archives of digital art and design.

"Digital Pioneers" draws on that collection. The story begins in the 1950s when computers, restricted up to then for military use, were introduced to universities and laboratories.

Mathematicians and scientists started to experiment by using them to create graphic effects, as did artists and designers. Typical is the earliest piece in the show, a 1952 photograph by Ben Laposky of electronic waves flickering across a screen.

During the 1960s, Herbert Franke and Frieder Nake developed sparse geometric images by sending instructions from computers to simple printers or plotters, machines with mechanical arms to guide a pen across a screen or paper. Artists, like Charles Csuri, then devised ways of introducing random elements to the process. By the 1970s, Harold Cohen, Roman Verotsko and the elder Mr. Brown had become so adept at working with computers that they were writing their own programs.

Many of the "Digital Pioneers" were women, including Lillian Schwartz, Vera Molnar and, later, Barbara Nessim. They may have been drawn to computer art as a new medium with fewer barriers to entry than established areas of the visual arts or technology, where women were less prominent at the time.

The exhibition ends at the turn of the 1980s with the introduction of paint programs, which simulate the traditional effects of brushes and pencils as they produce paintings and drawings. "Earlier artists, like Harold Cohen, devoted their lives to working directly with the machine without any intermediate software by writing their own computer programs to produce drawings," said Douglas Dodds, the V&A senior curator responsible for the show. "Paint programs enabled the new generation to produce work without having to understand the underlying technology."

Assembling an exhibition solely from its collection has prevented the V&A from presenting a comprehensive history of digital art and design. There are obvious omissions, like the work of Muriel Cooper and Ron MacNeil at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Visible Language Workshop in the 1970s. Even so, "Digital Pioneers" is an intriguing prelude to the visual extravaganza of "Decode."

Renowned for its historic collections of the decorative arts, the V&A sometimes stumbles when it encounters the contemporary, but "Decode" is a happy exception. All of the exhibits were made in the last five years, at a time when digital art and design have become more aesthetically refined and intellectually challenging. "Many of the projects are post-digital, less about fetishizing technology, and more about the ideas they are expressing," said Mr. Walter.

The first section of the exhibition shows how programmers, like Mr. Brown, and his American peers, John Maeda, Casey Reas and Joshua Davis, treat the raw data of computer code just like other craftsmen work with their chosen materials, by transforming it into something that looks lusciously seductive.

"Interactivity" explores the immersive potential of technology. You can "splash" paint across a screen by waving your arms in front of Mehmet Akten's Body Paint installation, or watch the branches of Simon Heidjens's digital trees move whenever the wind blows outside the V&A. These projects offer a foretaste of the next generation of sensor-controlled computers that we will operate with our voices or physical gestures, rather than keyboards and mice.

"Decode" ends with "Network," which examines the interconnections of mobile technologies and the Internet. It also illustrates how digital imagery is helping us to make sense of a frenzied, often confusing world. Take Aaron Koblin's "Flight Patterns," which shows a real-time image of the aircraft flight paths over the United States, something that changes so rapidly that it would have been impossible to depict in any other medium.

Fonte: New York Times, New York, Dec. 13th 2009, Design, online.