The MFA Design: Designer as Author + Entrepreneur program launched in 1998 as an alternative to most traditional MFA programs that emphasize form over content. We believed then and have proven that design must be integrated into content development. Designers are in the best position to conceive, prototype, manufacture and package their own creative content using all present and future media. Our goal is to help designers turn their design skills into ventures aimed directly at the public in a marketplace of commercial goods and social ideas.

Design Entrepreneurship enhances the teaching and learning of design not as a service but as part of a collaborative process—a process where many different kinds of creative people sit around the same table. Our students, therefore, work individually and collaboratively during two intensive years in an intellectually fertile environment to develop innovative ideas, products and campaigns using digital and hand tools. It is important to emphasize both cutting-edge and traditional technologies as interrelated and interdependent. Students, therefore, build professional relationships with our expert full-time and visiting faculty, experienced designers, typographers, videographers, investors and business people to ensure that their entrepreneurial ventures are aesthetically sound, conceptually innovative and commercially viable.

After 20 years our MFAD alumni have also become integral members of a growing community of creative and business specialists that has evolved into a veritable network of significant makers. Our goal is to tap into the wealth of talent available to us in New York to ensure that our graduates transcend the common definition of designers-as-service-providers into individual and collaborative authors of ideas and makers of objects both physical and virtual. Each year, our Venture Forum sheds a spotlight on remarkable work that builds the ability and confidence of the next generations.

Our students must still be fluent in the fundamental languages of graphic design and typography while maintaining literacy in all current communication methods and means. Students who have expertise in motion and sound design, writing and editing, interaction, video, branding and user experience are essential to fulfilling our mission.
Designers must convey ideas verbally and visually. While we do not teach students how to design in any particular style, we encourage them to excel at their skills and rise to high creative and experiential levels—and to articulate their own intentions.

The program is not restricted to a formulaic curriculum; we use a broad set of visual languages as the foundation for all creative and productive activity. We change aspects of the curricular offerings each year to be ahead of the proverbial curve.

Designers are afforded an efficient, professional environment in which to work and share their output. Our “MFA Design Studio,” accessible 24 hours a day, is a work environment, with individual workstations and group production facilities. Through the studio, students stay connected to the professional world, while partaking in the academic one.

The program embraces the future of design and is aimed at students and professionals from graphic design, product design, environmental design, film, photography and computer backgrounds as well as professionals who are interested in moving on to an entrepreneurial level and at the same time contribute to a perpetual start-up environment. As one of our students said, our own venture is to produce “thinkers, makers and doers who tackle every problem from every angle.”

—Steven Heller & Lita Talarico, co-chairs
About the Program

In their first year at MFA Design, students are given advanced instruction in a variety of design and trans-disciplinary skills such as interaction, motion graphics, branding, user experience, typography as a visual language, video and new media directing, and art book and digital publishing. Along with these skills-based courses, classes in business, marketing, ethnography, strategy, research, advertising, promotion, intellectual property and networking are offered.

The goal of the second year is the venture. Students are required to conceive and develop a viable product, campaign, experience, service or app for a determined and tested audience. Students design and prototype this venture that will be presented to a review panel of guest critics and faculty who then determine whether it has enough merit to progress to the next stage of development.

At the developmental stage, students produce a prototype for the purpose of pitching to investors, collaborators or distributors. This final product is presented in public at our Venture Forum at the SVA Theatre and subsequently to the design community.

The core faculty consists of distinguished contributors to the fields of graphic design, digital media, product design and business, and is supplemented by guest speakers and critics. Lecture series and off-site visits to design studios and firms are regularly scheduled throughout the academic year.

Degree candidates must successfully complete 60 credits, including all required courses, with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0. A residency of two academic years is required.

THE DESIGN ENTREPRENEUR VENTURE

The MFA Design venture is an entrepreneurial business that demands acute integration of graphic, interaction and product design, aesthetics, business and marketing. The end product is the culmination of intense research and development made ready for the marketplace or start-up investment. The venture can be virtual or physical. It can be an object, app, service, experience or advocacy campaign. It must be supported with extensive user experience research, iterating and testing. All assets must be functional and sustainable. The venture must have value to an audience that is quantifiable.

NETWORKING OUR GRADUATES

Students enrolled in the MFA Design: Designer as Author + Entrepreneur program study with renowned faculty and advisors that represent a wide range of design disciplines, viewpoints and methods, from traditional to progressive—notably design entrepreneurs, design strategists and design innovators. During the intense two years, students are introduced to various professional networks through our guest speakers and workshop leaders, who cover areas of type and typography, two- and three-dimensional objects, makers and inventors of products and user experiences. The faculty and guests are devoted to making this time in the designer’s life intellectually fruitful and creatively profitable.

MFA Design goes beyond the parameters of design by emphasis on design entrepreneurship. Students are immersed in the entrepreneurial start-up world through courses in business, intellectual property law and fundraising. These are not just ancillary classes but essential for today’s designer for a well-rounded career. Many successful products and ventures for profit and nonprofit outcomes have developed through student ventures, which are evaluated and critiqued by successful design entrepreneurs and business strategists. The venture is the beginning of an entrepreneurial adventure.

By graduation, designers know how to convincingly and cleverly pitch and negotiate. They are more confident and thus prepared to enter the next big stage of design practice, which involves creating their own content, which they brand, market and promote, while building business opportunities that will give something of value to their audiences.
MFA Design: A Look at Three Students and Their Projects in the MFA Program

PUTTING A SPOTLIGHT ON THE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE OF BEIRUT

We spoke to Tala Safie when she was finishing up her first year in the MFA Design program. She came to SVA for her masters after studying graphic design as an undergraduate in her native Beirut at the American University (AUB). After college, she worked for three years in a studio doing branding and editorial. However, she said she started to feel too comfortable. “It’s such a small city, everyone knows everybody. The clients are all the same, I just kept...”
going back and forth among them.” She said it was a great experience, but she wanted to use the tools she amassed to take the next step, which would be to leave Beirut for a bit and get her masters degree.

SVA was her first choice for a few reasons: the fact that the program is co-chaired by Steven Heller, and that Milton Glaser is on the faculty. “Meeting Glaser was one of my dreams,” she says. Of equal importance was the program’s focus on creating a venture. “I wanted a program where when you graduate you can start your own thing, as opposed to have to go work for someone else.”

Tala’s venture is a digital magazine. “My comfort zone is print, but I wanted to challenge myself. If you’re going to make a magazine online, how do you take advantage of that? What works? What helps with storytelling?” How is she getting over the learning curve to switch from print to digital? “The program provides technological workshops. We have coding classes now. It’s not my strong suit, but I know how it works,” she says. “I know that if I worked with a developer, I’d know how to express what I wanted from him or her. I know what is feasible or not.”

The magazine will focus on socio-cultural themes coming out of Beirut. “There was a civil war in Lebanon from the 1970s to the early 90s and a lot of the art that followed reflected that period. It was very interesting, of course, but also a bit gloomy.” She explains the new generation, which is further removed from that time, is incredibly exciting to watch, and she wants her magazine to be a showcase for that: “They’re trying new initiatives and the design scene is booming. There are a lot of artist residencies and incubators, there are new magazines popping up, and new design studios. It’s very interesting—you can learn about it in my magazine!”
TOUCHING HEARTS THROUGH DESIGN

Julia Marsh went to UC Santa Barbara as an undergraduate. She aspired to be a writer, so on the first day of college she headed to the university’s newspaper office to try to get an editorial position. But, perhaps fatefully, they only had an opening in layout design. “The designer convinced me to be her understudy,” Julia says. “Within three months I took her job over, and I remained the layout director for the newspaper for three years. So, that’s how I found graphic design, and from there it was my obsession.”

Her university didn’t offer a major in graphic design, so she educated herself by working several graphic design jobs while finishing up her undergraduate degree. That experience and passion led to an art director position at a start-up straight out of college. Simultaneously she had applied to SVA’s MFA Design program. “I had never gotten that design education,” Julia explains. “And I was really craving to be formally educated about design and to understand the art world and know my place in it.”

Julia is now in her first year in the MFA program. Last semester, her teacher, Stefan Sagmeister, presented the class with an assignment to “touch people’s hearts with design.” She read from her notebook a quote by Sagmeister that she had written down: “Design always has more effect if it comes from a personal place and it’s going to affect someone in a personal way.” Keeping that in mind she set out on her solution.

She crafted a 20-foot long installation comprised of letters that spelled out “Take Care.” Each letter was filled with boxes of tampons and panty liners free for the taking by passersby. The products were supplied by Brandless—a company she had worked for before attending SVA. “I asked them to sponsor me and they immediately said yes. We lugged the installation down to the front of the New York Public Library. The boxes look super neutral; it didn’t feel like a branded giveaway. People were so happy about it!” Brandless liked the event so much that they decided to do it again for International Women’s Day, in four locations around the country: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Louisiana and California.
STUDENT DESIGNS A SKILL-SHARING SOLUTION
Akansha Kukreja had earned an undergraduate degree in visual communication, and after a couple of years working as a designer in Mumbai, she decided she wanted to pursue a master’s degree. “I felt I had to learn more and get a design sensibility not just of India, but of all the international markets,” she says. “That’s why I chose SVA.”

The MFA Design program is very intimate—the students take all the same courses together. One day in class she had an idea that could benefit her and her classmates. “We get a certain amount of technical classes, learning different types of software, but there are a lot of things that we aren’t taught, and at this stage we don’t expect SVA to teach us everything,” she says. “But we all come with different backgrounds and have different skills sets. So I thought, ‘Why don’t we just hang out and teach each other?’”

From there she started organizing classes. She branded her community skill-sharing idea “Flock”—from the maxim “Birds of a feather flock together.” She designed a prototype for an app and website. “We were asked to create an MVP (minimum viable product) so I chose MailChimp and I sent out an email for the classes we were hosting. I gave a brief and students signed up,” Akansha says. “We did a documentary screening and a workshop on Cinema 4D.” The classes have been a good testing ground for further improvements.

“The teachers need to be better prepared,” she realized. “And I need to send out a link beforehand for everyone to download software.” She created a manifesto for Flock. “It’s got a lot of bird metaphors in it,” she says. “But essentially the message is let’s be nice to each other and teach each other.”

For her thesis, she wants to explore the idea of using technology for good. “I’m really interested in social media addiction. Not to eliminate it, but how to tap into it and use your time on your phone better, for better human interaction,” she says.
Curriculum/
Sample Program

Degree candidates must successfully complete 60 credits, including all required courses, with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0. A residency of two academic years is required.

FIRST YEAR / FALL

- Can Design Touch Someone’s Heart? ........................................... 3
- Design and Branding ................................................................. 3
- Design and Intentions ............................................................... 3
- Telling Stories ........................................................................... 3
- Writing and Designing the Visual Book ..................................... 3
- Design Technology Workshop I .................................................. 0
- Paul Rand Lecture Series .......................................................... 0

FIRST YEAR / SPRING

- Design Decisions ....................................................................... 1.5
- Interaction Aesthetics: Designing Digital Products in the 20th Century .... 3
- Mapping the Customer Journey .................................................. 1.5
- Embracing the Unknown ............................................................. 3
- The Venture: Getting From Theory to Reality ................................ 3
- Thesis Introduction ..................................................................... 3

SECOND YEAR / FALL

- Designing Value ........................................................................ 3
- Seminars I .................................................................................. 3
- Thesis Consultation (Preparation) ................................................ 3
- Thesis Consultation (Research and Development) ....................... 3
- Thesis Matrix ............................................................................. 1.5
- Intellectual Property and the Law ................................................. 1.5

SECOND YEAR / SPRING

- Seminars II ................................................................................ 3
- Thesis Consultation (Pitch and Presentation) ............................... 6
- Thesis Consultation (Production) .................................................. 3
- Thesis Video and Media Launch ................................................... 3
- Design Technology Workshop II ................................................ 0

Degree candidates must successfully complete 60 credits, including all required courses, with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0. A residency of two academic years is required.

Student Highlight

Shira Chung

STILL HOUSE TEA

Still House Tea is a traditional tea service adapted for a contemporary audience to provide relaxation over small cups of tea. Occurring in 20 minute sessions, our experience invites customers to unwind as they sip slowly and intentionally.
Course Offerings

DESIGN AND INTENTIONS
Instructor: Milton Glaser
This course is structured to help students examine their assumptions about their own work. It begins with a restaurant project where many design considerations intersect, such as communication, service, interior spaces, lighting, color and comfort. The course continues with a series of exercises that intends to disrupt or support the students’ working methods. Ultimately, the objective is to develop an awareness of what they are already doing.

CAN DESIGN TOUCH SOMEONE’S HEART
Instructor: Stefan Sagmeister
It is widely assumed that movies, literature and music get to our emotional core. It seems to be more difficult for design to achieve a similar effect. In this course, students will explore how to achieve this with three individual assignments.

WRITING AND DESIGNING THE VISUAL BOOK
Instructor: Warren Lehrer
This course combines design and literature to create integrated and meaningful expression. Students will develop their creative writing skills through a sequence of exercises in continuous writing, observational writing, tilting objects and images, theatrical improvisation, storytelling, writing from different points of view, structuring a narrative and editing. Selected texts from exercises are then set into a variety of book formats, using any combination of book structures, typography, images and symbols. Emphasis is placed on discovering a visual form that emerges out of the meaning and shape of an original text. Historical and contemporary examples of “visual text” will be presented.

EMBRACING THE UNKNOWN
Instructor: Will Harding
This course will introduce students to the design sprint process and how it can help designers quickly form hypotheses and test them. With an emphasis on iterative and collaborative design thinking, we can use simple tools to get our best ideas into testable forms quickly with results that can deliver critical business insights.

DESIGN AND BRANDING
Instructor: Kevin Brainard
In this course students will develop a comprehensive brand identity that reinforces the narrative of a chosen business or service. Our theoretical readings will be complemented with historical competitive audits to identify and leverage unique opportunities to develop the brand’s story. Critical thinking, iterative design methodology, and a synthesis of research, design production and presentation will be emphasized.

Student Highlight
Jessica Lin
BEHIND THE CURTAIN
Digital platform for Broadway theatergoers that enhances insightful and immersive experiences beyond the physical theater.

Ready to explore Broadway in a whole new way?
THE VENTURE: FROM THEORY TO REALITY
Instructor: Ken Carbone
In this course students will explore thesis concepts to be fully developed in the second year. This will be like thesis “boot camp” where students will take a disciplined process of idea generation that balances a personal passion with a practical, market-driven opportunity. During this process we will focus on your core skills and base of knowledge that can best support your thesis and ensure an outstanding result. The goal is to prepare you to enter the second year with a strong conceptual foundation to further develop your venture. This will not be the final thesis but a direction that has been tested for its fundamental viability in advance of further refinement.

THESIS VIDEO AND MEDIA LAUNCH
Instructor: Ada Whitney
The video that you create in this course will define the essential need for your product, what it does and how it will be viable. The resulting spot (30 seconds to two minutes) will become a cornerstone of your marketing and fundraising plan. This course is divided into conception and production sections. Students will develop narratives through storyboards and scripts. Shooting, lighting, sound, editing and authoring skills, and software programs will be covered. In addition, collaborative class projects are dedicated to concept, design and production of branding and packaging for the Venture Forum.

DESIGNING VALUE
Instructor: Amy Wang
Successful ventures are technically feasible, financially viable and desirable on a personable level. But who is doing the desiring? What do they want? And how will they trust they are getting it? This course will guide thesis projects through the desirability lens using design research methodology and arrive at insights that inform the design principles, value proposition, and business model of each venture.

MAPPING THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY
Instructor: Marc Rabinowitz
Customers increasingly experience brands, products and services through multiple channels and touchpoints. Students will participate in a facilitated workshop to map an end-to-end view of their customer’s journey, from discovery and first use through ongoing use of their product/service. With a focus on user needs and tasks, students will identify key moments to research and develop uniquely branded/ownable interactions, points of differentiation and increased value for their users.

Students are asked to create a typeface based on the work of pioneering modernist design Ladislav Sutnar. Cirkus was designed by Emily Wack (MFAD ’19).
We have a teacher from Facebook teaching a course. The program is very up to date with what’s happening.”
—Tala Safie (MFAD 2018)
APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS
For detailed instructions, visit: sva.edu/grad/howtoapply
- Online Application and $80 Application Fee: sva.edu/apply
- Statement of Intent/Personal Statement
- Résumé
- Letters of Recommendation
- Official College Transcript

Some applicants may be required to submit the following:
- Proof of English Proficiency
- Copy of Permanent Residency Card
- Declaration of Finances
- Verification of Finances
- Foreign Transcript Evaluation

DEPARTMENTAL REQUIREMENTS
For specific guidelines about these requirements, visit: sva.edu/grad/deptreq
- Portfolio—accepted at svagrad.slideroom.com
- Interview

DEADLINES
For information on application deadlines, visit: sva.edu/grad/timeline

IMPORTANT LINKS
- FAQ: sva.edu/grad/faq
- International students: sva.edu/grad/intl
- Tuition and fees: sva.edu/tuition
- Visit SVA: sva.edu/grad/visit
Hold your beliefs lightly and remember that belief is usually a sign of a closed mind. Examine your assumptions and never stop re-examining them.”

—Milton Glaser, faculty

We encourage applicants to visit our department. Contact us directly to schedule a departmental tour at mfadesign@sva.edu. For more information and to register, go to: sva.edu/grad/visit.

If you have any questions about the application process, contact Graduate Admissions at 212.592.2107 or email: gradadmissions@sva.edu.

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School of Visual Arts

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