

Bradbury Thompson: Born 1911

by Steven Heller

Introduction & Interview

Introduction

Topeka, Kansas, is not the first place one would expect to find a modernist designer. Yet in the mid-1930s, as a student who coveted copies of the urbane magazines *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, Bradbury Thompson knew that his life's work would be committed to printing and the design of type and image. What he could not predict was that so many of his designs for magazines and books in the years that followed would be valued for what they taught the profession. One of

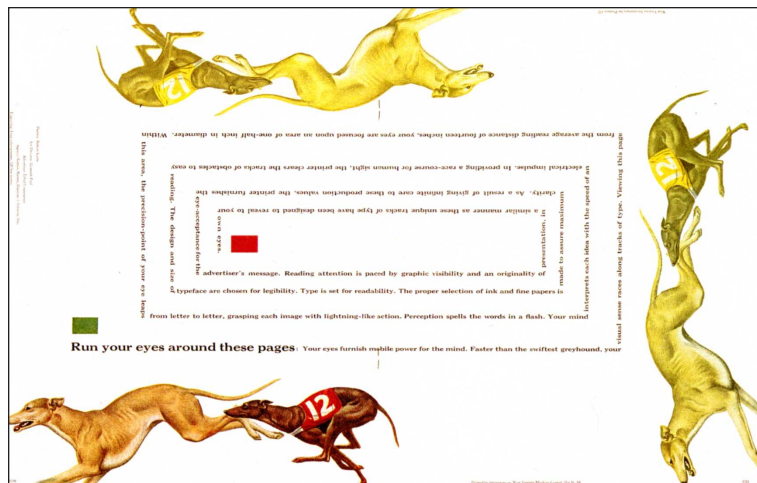
his major contributions was as a designer and an editor of *Westvaco Inspirations* from 1938 to 1962, a paper and printing periodical sent to educators and art directors in all disciplines; it featured alternatives to conventional design and was a showcase for new illustration, typography, and posters. Yet *Westvaco Inspirations* was more than just a periodic report on the state of the art. It was a vehicle for Thompson to experiment with printing, type, and color. Allowing his typography

to be playful or to mirror content with dynamic juxtapositions using both modern and historical references, Thompson sought to achieve clarity without forsaking vitality. Throughout the many issues of *Westvaco Inspirations* his approach was decidedly eclectic, giving equal weight to modern and historical references. Thompson was also art director of *Mademoiselle* and design director of *ArtNews* in the decades following World War II; and he designed the formats for three dozen

magazines, including Smithsonian. Thompson has designed over one hundred United States postage stamps. In these he has distilled history and emotion in a visual form of haiku.

Since 1969 Bradbury Thompson has not only designed a number of United States postage stamps, but he has influenced the work of many others in this field. In his 1982 commemorative stamp for America's libraries he uses letter forms from a 1523 alphabet drawn by the French aesthetician Geoffroy Tory for Champ Fleury, a treatise on Roman lettering.





A typographic game, "Run your eyes around these pages," is played to show how rapidly our eyes respond to the unexpected. The greyhounds also dash around the page in two, three, and four colors, reinforcing the movement of the typography.

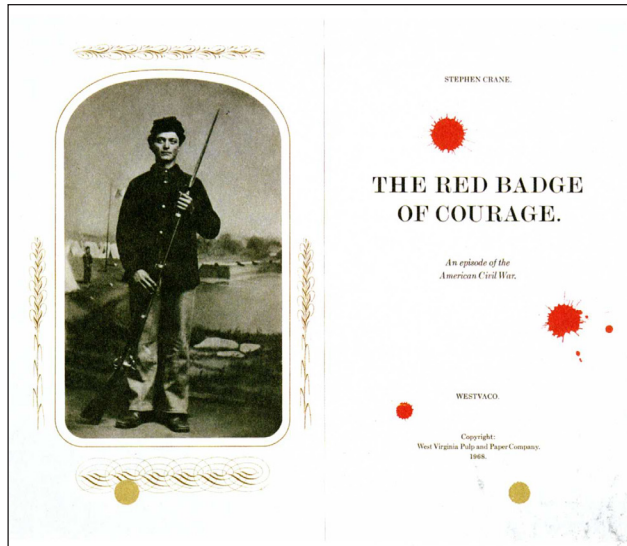
Interview

In the late 1950s I was asked to provide Westvaco an idea for a gift which they could present to their clients at Christmastime. I thought, here is a paper company that produces the products on which books are printed; and I offered to assist them with the publication of classic books. Therefore, the first book, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving, was designed with classic restraint, centered type, and margins. For the next, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, and *Other Sketches* by Mark Twain, I gained

the courage to do it in a modern spirit, like the design I had been using in *Westvaco Inspirations*. I wanted to break from the traditional characteristics of the 1867 first edition, justified spacing and the use of cap letters, so I went to a flush left-ragged right type arrangement. Although my book design was based on classic models, there was no reason why one should be forever tied to tradition, and this method brought new vitality to a classic text. Tradition and new ideas can be reconciled on the basis of appropriate typefaces and illustrations.

In 1963 I really broke free from traditional book restraints with the design for *American Cookery*, by Amelia Simmons. The type is all flush left-ragged right, with overhanging heads on the left and asymmetrical placement of other design elements. I used classical illustrations but deployed them the way one might in a magazine. In a different vein, for an Edgar Allan Poe story called "The Balloon Hoax" I researched a copy of *The Sun* newspaper from 1844 and designed the format in the fashion of old newspapers, using engravings of the period. Unlike a purely classical

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane
frontispiece: 8 1/2 x 5 1/2 format Published by
Westvaco Corporation as part of the American
Classic Book Series, 1968



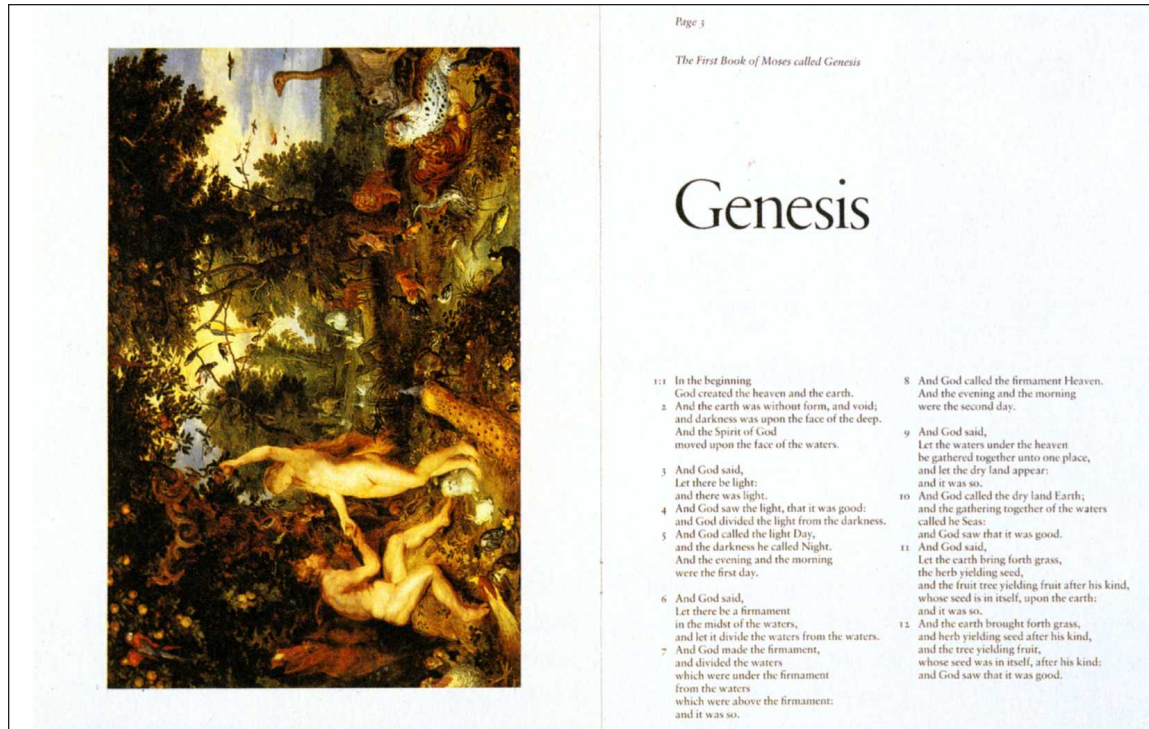
rendering, this approach was imbued with a modern, eclectic spirit. For the design of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* we die-cut a bullet hole through the book, and printed what appear to be splatters of blood on random pages. This idea came from stories about Bibles and other objects saving the lives of men in battle during the Civil War. This was a way of bringing realism to the design. I made the outside of the book look like an old cartridge case, and instead of printing the title on the spine, I put "Stephen Crane," as if that case were a diary. For the

interior I retained the classic book design of that time, centered heading and justified type, to provide realism.

The Washburn College Bible project came about because I had been a consultant to the Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, which asked me if I would like to design a Bible. Of course I wanted to, but it needed to be on my aesthetic and typographic terms.

First, I set the type flush left, ragged right, which would be a completely modern interpretation of Gutenberg's

original. Then, I realized that once set this way the short verses would often come up too short. I often had one word left over in the last line, so I made some adjustments. I found that by setting it in phrases I could emphasize the rhythm of the human voice, and help make the archaic English of the King James Version of 1611 perfectly clear. If one reads this version in its original justified form, it's hard to comprehend. When I put it into phrases beautiful things happened. At first I made them too long, and they weren't effective. So I shortened them, starting with "In the

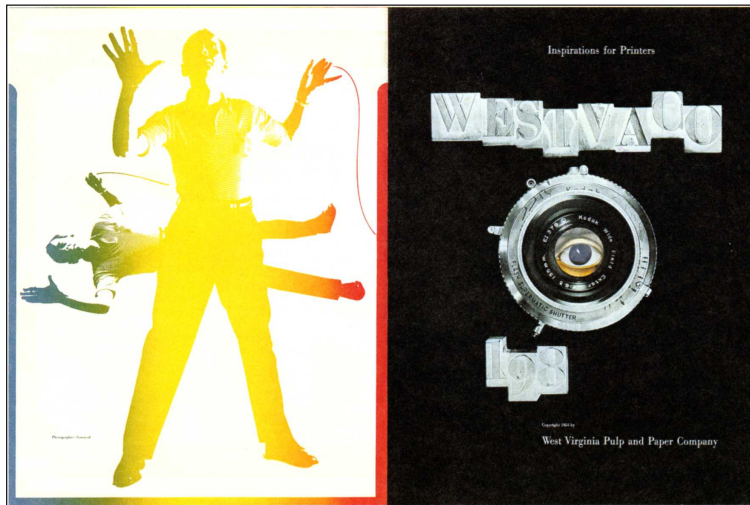


The Washburn College Bible 1979 three volumes pp. 2-3: 14 x 10 format Published by Washburn College, Topeka, Kansas

beginning” or “God created the Heavens and the Earth” as one line. In the early Bibles typographers did not use quotation marks because they had not been invented, so the editors of 1611 began a sentence wherever there was a quotation by writing “And God said” or “Behold.”

As short phrases these were functional and vital aids to understanding. But my approach seems appropriate when one recalls that the King James Version was written during the time of Shakespeare, when eloquent dialogues were made on stage.

I was also determined to bring great art into this book: here was a chance to have works of art begin each chapter. The caption on the verso side of each picture not only gives all the practical information, including artist, date, and collection, but it also provides the verse



These spreads from Westvaco Inspirations exemplify two areas of graphic design in which Bradbury Thompson has been a major innovator: photographic reproduction and typography. In a 1954 piece photographer Ben Somoroff's self-portrait is reproduced using three colors of ink in a split fountain on a one-color press. The eye, opposite, looks through the die-cut hole of a camera lens from the page that follows.

from the Bible that inspired the artist to paint the picture in the first place. This was actually a modern publishing technique, for it was my hope that the reader would be persuaded to turn to that text. If the job of a designer is to make material more understandable, the Bible is

the ultimate challenge. I was pleased because I was able to include in this English, or Protestant, textual version many great works of art from the Catholic Italian Renaissance. And more important, I came to realize that three-fourths of the Bible is the Hebrew Old Testament. So I was

happy to be joining all of these related, but disassociated, religions and eras into one homogeneous entity.