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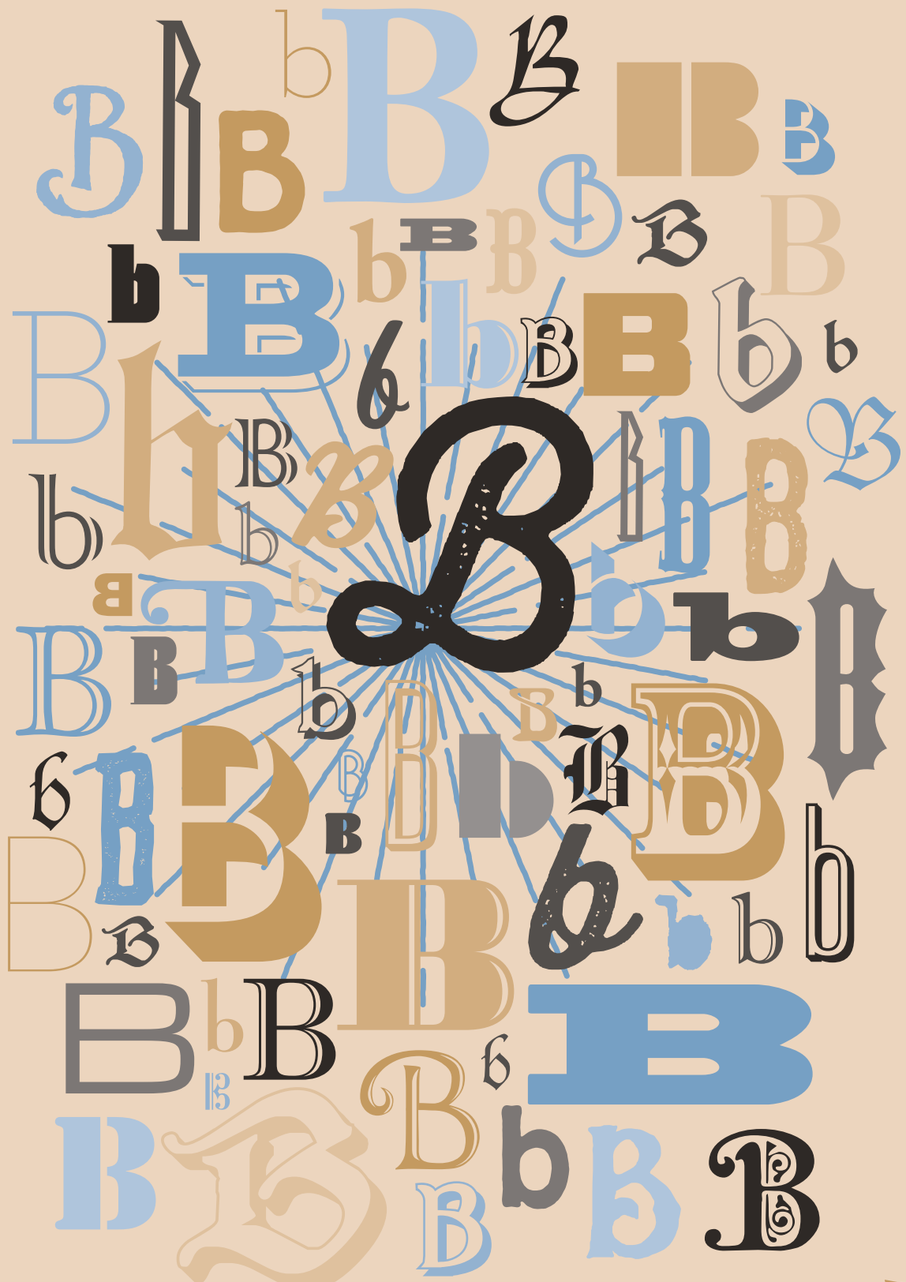

The Rule-Benders

by David Jury

A PREAMBLE

This sketchbook, dated 1891 (illustrated) contain work by Walter Bunn: a young, for a printing company in Norwich. The first few pages contain pen and ink drawings and watercolor sketches, but these soon given way to articulate renderings of hypothetical jobbing work, including a considerable number of intricately drawn business cards – all for 'Walter Bunn'. The sketchbook ends with a flourish: a series of pages which are rather more complex, more confident, using type in an exuberant, exploratory and inventive manner. Walter Bunn, presumably of his own volition, was doing exactly what any 21st century student of graphic design should be encouraged to do.

Printing apprentices were not generally, encouraged to think of their 'trade' as a creative outlet, and so a sketchbook of ideas that have no immediate purpose is rare document indeed. Yet Bunn's sketchbook clearly illustrates how a minority of printers in the UK were Imagining their trade (or 'profession') could develop. After all, the nature of commerce was changing fast and graphic communication suddenly offered opportunities for creative rather than rule-governed solutions. The independence of spirit promoted in the bi-monthly magazine The British Printer and annual The Printers' International Specimen Exchange suggested a bright and exciting future for the print trade, if it could only adapt to the creative needs of the commercial sector. This article describes how a small number in the UK print trade, and many more in the United States of America, attempted to change the orthodoxy of graphic communication from within the print industry. Why did it fail? What was it that led Walter Bunn, a compositor, to imagine himself as a graphic designer, a profession that would not be commonplace for another 50 years?

The 19th century had been a period of ever accelerating reform and innovation. Between 1800 and 1850 the population of Great Britain doubled, from ten to twenty million, during which time, the cost of living dropped by approximately 50 per cent, while wages remained roughly the same. More people with more money. And yet, as the 19th century progressed, the main commercial printing process remained letterpress and of the 500 printing firms in London in 1850, it is estimated that over 80 per cent employed just three men of fewer'.

The kind of work these printers were employed to do (because book, magazine and, particularly newspaper production now required specialist printing equipment) might typically have been labels and packaging, stationary, posters, leaflets and handbills, legal work and security printing. Such work was called jobbing (perhaps, initially, from the term odd job) and was very much the result of increasing commercial competition, improvements in transport and, of course, the technical potential of the printing industry itself. Printing presses were certainly becoming more accurate, faster, and so could offer a highly cost-effective method of informing potential customers of products and services.

"What was it that led Walter Bunn, a compositor, to imagine himself as a graphic designer, a profession that would not be commonplace for another 50 years?"

artistic PRINTING in NORTH AMERICA

The same process of social and economic development had been taking place in North America. By 1870, having come through a period of pioneering and exploration and, of course, a civil war, Americans were generally of a happy disposition. The nation was a century old the air of celebration and confidence found expression in embellishment: architecture, furniture, fashion (and huge facial whiskers) as well as in the appearance of print.

In America, where conventions were considered to belong to the 'old world', there were fewer reservations, and, perhaps, even considerable enthusiasm for the breaking of rules. This bravado certainly appears to have been encourage by business customers who were demanding more 'attractive', less conventional printed matter in order to promote their goods and services. As in England, jobbing had been a common term used to describe such work, but as the commercial potential and prestige of this new market grew, some printing offices, to distinguish themselves from 'run-of-the-mill' printers, began calling themselves Art Jobbing Offices, Art Printers or, most commonly, Artistic Printers.

The Sources of this embellishment are rarely referred to in the literature of the time. The period immediately preceding the art-jobbing era certainly included flamboyant, idiosyncratic, typefaces but these had their aesthetic roots in the industries for which they were ultimately used. Edmund Gress in his book, Fashions in American Typography described them thus: 'There is a dominate black tone in the types combined with a certain squareness and plainness of form that reflects a rugged and pioneering mood: log cabins, canal boats, black plug hats, black boots, stagecoaches, covered wagons, black beards, masted schooners and storms at sea, black frock coats of southern gentlemen, black smoke from funnels and the new steamers. It was a period of strength of character and purpose.' And yet, these typefaces, which today represent everything about early industrial America were inexplicably dropped in favor of new 'exotic' faces suggestive of Japan, North Africa and Asia.

Osca Harpel of Cincinnati published in 1870 his Typography of Book of Specimens, a manual containing technical information, suggestions, and a collection of letterpress jobbing examples. This book was devoted to the 'art' of compositor, rather than the usual, routine details of composing room skills. Harpel explained, '…Such [an artistic] spirit, if properly maintained, can only promote the interests of all concerned, and serve to elevate Printing still higher as a substantial and creative Art.' Printed in five colors by Harpel himself, this book aspired to make any compositor 'a typographic whiz'. It was certainly a revelation of the possibilities of letterpress printing. There was a growing sense of being liberated from the conventions of the past. The past belonged to the 'old world', the future. Reading the literature of the time it is clear that a large number of printers in America took up Artistic Printing with a passion that was close to religious fervor.

There followed a substantial and earnest adoption of Harpel's approach, and offices were established throughout North America, making what was generally described as artistic printing a specialty. Typefounders eagerly contributed, producing new display types in great profusion, enlarging their production of dingbats and even supplying rule-bending devices, such as the 'Crinkle'.

This situation was supported by considerable improvements made in the manufacture of the auxiliary items to typography in America. Firstly, there was the huge number of display types (often termed 'fancy' or 'exotic' types) made available, many of which were elaborately decorated and shaded, influenced in part by the hand-drawn, ornamental lithographic letters and commercial signage that had been so common for some time.

There was also a great variety of typographic borders and embellishments introduced. These expanded the possibilities of letterpress printing and made possible many decorative, 'artistic' or 'fancy' effects previously only obtainable with the assistance of the wood-engraver of the lithographer.

Secondly, the printing machine s could be operated with a remarkable precision and power. Heavier and more powerful presses than those available in England ensured that perfect register could be obtained, certainly more accurately than any hand-press. Running at high speed these machines made it economical for the printer to work in many colors, something that would have previously been too expensive.

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AMERICAN PRINTERS
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Thirdly, the ink manufacturers provided the printer with a much larger range of colors and hues, varnishes and many-hued bronzes. Ink was better made and being manufactured in bulk, was being sold at much lower prices. Lastly, paper manufacturers were providing paper that was more consistent in both weight and color, more stable, and, importantly, did not require dampening.

A sense of change was in the air, and American printers genuinely felt that they were not only currently the best in the world, but the best printers ever. They celebrated their current status and pitied earlier printers; '…the multifarious demands on plain and ornamental job-printing, united with the modern facilities for cheap and rapid production, incited modern typefounders to call into existence the bewildering variety of beautiful creations which adorn their specimen books, and subsequently, give force and elegance to thousands of printers' products which were unknown half a century ago'.

An insight into the way the American printer viewed the product of his newly established 'art' is offered here in a review of a print-specimen reproduced in the influential journal American Model Printer of 1879, 'AV Haight, Poughkeepsie, New York, sends us his latest business card, which we must pronounce as beautiful. The design is japanesque, with all the beauties of modern adornment. It is elegant in its simplicity and precise in execution. The colors used are gold, emerald green, bright red, medium violet and orange tints, field of light blue tint, also a field of gloss black. The lettering is Gothic italic capitals, worked in gold and black, producing a fine gold shade.'

The commitment to Artistic Printing can be seen in type-specimen books issued between 1870 and 1895 by many of the American printers. Typically, Rand & Avery of Boston displayed 175 different design of type, and although many are single fonts, some run to six, seven or eight sizes. All available in one printing office! This commitment to change, to the investment in a renewed, redefined printing industry did not fail to be noticed in England - the undoubted center of what Americans considered to be the 'old world'.

This distinction between the old and new worlds was made explicit in the pages of the American Model Printer. In the issue number one of 1879, an article titled 'American Style', takes the perceived 'blinkered view' of the English printer to task: 'it is the fashion with printers which they find with the habits and customs and even policitical life of our people. It is, they say, "liberty run mad;" a "style that is no style," etc. The trouble with these gentlemen is that they have been trained in a narrow an conventional school, where everything is done according to the old traditions of thee craft, and are thus pre-disqualified from properly estimating not only the present beauty of American job-work, but its certain influence on foreign styles in the future… There is wide diversity of taste among American printers.. most of this diversity comes from the laudable desire to produce original work. The feeling of independence is in the air. It is this which has flooded the country with inventions and labor-saving devices, and which will enable America, in time, to control the markets of the world.'

In the same issue, in an article titled 'Job Printing as an Art', the standards of job printing in England, Ireland, Italy, Spain, France, and Switzerland, are each, in turn, assessed. Here is the final paragraph concerning England: 'the general peculiarity of English job printing is its abruptness and sameness of appearance – with nothing to charm the eye or enrapture the sense. Typefaces so old and sameness of appearance – with nothing to charm the eye of enrapture the sense. Typefaces so old and tiresome that one asks – is there never to be change? Or are the followers of the craft there incapable of originating a new feature? Still, these plain faces of letters might be made attractive if they were only artistically arranged… Notwithstanding all this, there is a character to English printing, and that is its painful plainness, lacking nearly all prerequisites pertaining to art.'

To English printers who cared about this criticism, it would have been no consolation that all the other 'old world' countries fared no better in the opinion of this (unaccredited) author. Not surprisingly, the words 'arrogance' and 'ignorance' were commonly used in reply. But there were a few influential people within the print industry in England who thought the Americans had a point, and by political and commercial astuteness were to divert the conservatism of the English printer of a brief but quite remarkable period.

ARTISTIC PRINTING IN England

The rise of Artistic Printing in England may be traced to the Great Exhibition in 1851 generating an interest in all things 'exotic', and to the Caxton exhibition in 1871. Certainly some printers must also have obtained copies of Harpel's book but the Artistic Style undoubtedly received its greatest impetus by the establishment in England of The Printers' International Specimen Exchange in 1880. Organized by Andrew White-Tuer, the editor of the journal Paper and Printing, the concept (put forward in a letter by Thomas Hailing to the editor) was simple but ingenious. Each subscriber (at a cost of one shilling provided a certain number of a typographic specimens (200 were required for the first issue) which represented their best work. These were then collated into set so that each subscriber received 200 specimens, all different, in place of his own 200 all alike. For an additional charge, subscribers could receiver their samples arranged in alphabetical order and tipped into leather-bound volumes.

Following the success of the The Exchange (which continued to be published almost annually until 1989) a number of the leading printers adopted the idea of issuing their own special work-specimen books, published at a nominal price. Such overt, self-publicizing activities were unique were unique in a print trade which had previously been renowned for its tradition of reticence, and adherence to the conversions of quiet conservatism. A new, brazen spirit, born not only of competition, but also of the possibility of individuality had been realized. Imported inks, papers and printing presses also offered the English printer the chance to compete fairly at an international level.

The quality of North American printing was certainly recognized in England during this period as being superior, and, indeed, one of the prime reasons given by its editor for setting up the The Exchange was specifically to improve the state of British printing.

A comparison of two contemporary printing journals of the time, the American Model Printer and the British Printer makes clear the differences in both print quality and typographic design. The American Model Printer, first published in October 1879, has the larger format; 12.5 x 9.5 inches (317 x 242 mm). It is primarily printed in a single color, although the first few pages were lavishly and immaculately printed in numerous colors to display examples of contemporary 'Artisitic' work. The text typography is generously leaded, compared with most English text setting, and the headings are set in carefully spaced sans serif caps. Occasionally, decorative caps are used, but these are very rare. Overall, decorative caps are used, but these are very rare. Overall, the appearance of the American Model Printer, despite its overt support of artistic printing, displays considerable restraint. Even the masthead, though flamboyant, sits comfortably at the head of the title page. The quality of the printing is excellent, the choice of paper and its weight is perfect is excellent the choices of paper and its weight is perfect for the format.

"This interest in 'ye old English' imagery, ill-defined at the time as 'ANTIQUE' or 'OLD STYLE' might be explained as reflecting the printer's desire for pedigree."

The British Printer although launched in January 1888, nine years after the American Model Printer, comes a very poor second, despite its editorial admitting an aspiration to match the standards of the American journal. The quality of the English printing is inferior and so is the paper. But it is the overall design which most clearly differentiates the two. Although claiming to be entirely supportive of the Artistic ideals, the masthead on the title page of the British Printer has an amorphous appearance which can only be described as quasi-historical, taking the vague form of an ancient paper scroll and, simultaneously, something equivalent to a medieval banner.

This interest in 'ye old English' imagery, ill-defined at the time as 'Antique' or 'Old Style' might be explained as reflecting the printer's desire for pedigree. It was certainly the stimulus of Caslon-Revivalism, and, as a result, some printers were prepared not only to print in the 'Old Style' but would, for example, describe themselves in the colophon thus: 'Concernynge thys Boke, and ye Impyntynge thereof, it hath ben done wythe cunnynge Crafte by Maister George Falkner & hys Sons… after ye style of daies longe gone bye, inasmuch as Masiter William Caxton hyself maye have ben ye imprynter.' This example from 1881 is not, by any means, an isolated case.

This interest in Caxton was due to an exhibition of his work in 1871 and this encouraged a great deal of imitation. Andrew White-Tuer was one of several involved in the organization of this exhibition and he explained the revival of 'old-style' (or 'antique') as follows, 'Prince Albert, among other tastes, had one for delicate printing, and when the Great Exhibition of 1851 was about to open he enquired whether it would not be possible to get a display of old-style types. Of course, every foundry was searched for matrices… After a long search, Caslon's found some stored away among their rubbish. The type was cast, and the visitors to the Exhibition stared curiously at the long S's and the oddities of "old-face"'.

The 'Old Style' also took a foothold in America, De Vinne being one of it's many proponents – if only for a short time - and was seen as something of a rival to the 'artistic' printer, although, as in both England and America, the two styles often, and probably inadvertently, merged. The British Printer is a typical example of Artistic Printing conceding to the 'Old Style' and possibly influenced by the appearance of two new American magazines, The American Art Printer and The Superior Printer, both launched in 1887 (a year before the British Printer was launched).

Robert Hilton, a senior employee at the influential Leicestershire printing company, Raithby Lawrence – and a leader in the Artistic style – became the first editor of the British Printer, launched in 188, the same year he took over The Exchange. George W Jones, who was also employed as foreman at Raithby Lawrence, designed British Printer and set up The British Typogaphia association of which the British Printer was the association's mouthpiece.

"In America, by the late 1890's, the rule-bending era was all but over, its abrupt demise hastened by changes in both aesthetic and technological developments."

But it was the work of another Raithby Lawrence employee, the forman Robert Grayson, who became designer of the British Printer when Jones retired, that is still referred to as the Leicestershire Free Style. Under Grayson, the principles of Artistic Printing were by no means abandon, but they were certainly tainted by old-Style influences. Tints were still mixed and rules bent, but the tints generally became darker, pervading the work with a weary, gloomy appearance. Printing was suffering the symptoms of a serious malady which had gripped the whole of Victorian society, a malady of 'aesthetic decrepitude', and which both John Ruskin and William Morris campaigned hard to cure. 'Old-Style' printers might have imagined that they were returning to a tradition, but they were, in reality, falling back upon one of the forms of archaism which had been a 'crutch' for most English printers since the 18th century.

The last issue of The Printers' International Specimen Exchange, number 16 published in 1898, three years after number15, is the thinnest of all volumes and the overall standard of work is decidedly lasklustre.

In America, by the late 1890's, the rule-bending era was all but over, its abrupt demise hastened by changes in both aesthetic and technological developments. Firstly, the many adherents of the emerging arts and crafts movement in England lost no opportunity to express their utter contempt for the banality of Hapel's arbitrary use of decorative relics when compared with the 'purity of the 15th century revival' being undertaken by William Morris and the American followers of the bugeoning private press movement. But the significant pressures of economics driven by mechanization should not be underestimated.

From the 1890ss onwards, a range and variety of mechanical typesetting devices were patented, each of them introduced as being more efficient in the composing of types than the fingers of the compositor. A more rational, more economic style certainly had its advantages and its advocates.

The contempt which was finally felt for Artistic Printing is typically expressed here by the American Samual E Lesser writing in the British Printer in 1929, '…despite all the ingenuity exercised, it must be admitted that Artistic Printing was all "loves labor lost" in so far as lasting worth was concerned. It had as little relation to real typographic beauty as the process of putting jigsaw puzzles together has, and, indeed, it required just that kind of mentality and skill. If this be an American contribution to typography, none can be found today to be proud of it as such.

However, the physical nature of letterpress and the cunning of the canny businessman/printer ensured that remnants of the 'Artistic' era would haunt the shelves of grocery stores and the pages of the small-ads columns well into the 20th century. The few products that, somehow, survived the arrival of mass-marketing policies and corporate standardization in the 60s and 70s are now vigorously protected for their highly individual and valuable 'brand heritage'.

POSTSCRIPT

So enthusiastic was the disposal of all traces of Artistic Printing that Oscar Harpel's bravado letterpress book has become very rare. There is no record of it being in any British public collection except the St Bride Printing Library, London, and there appears to be only a small number available in public collection in North America.