

1927

WHAT IS NEW TYPOGRAPHY?

Walter Dexel

WALTER DEXEL (1890–1973) was a Constructivist painter and advertising designer who organized painting exhibitions for Expressionist artists of aesthetic and political movements—*Die Brücke*, *Der Blaue Reiter*, and *Der Sturm*—as well as for the Bauhaus masters Vassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. He is, however, a marginalized figure within the group of designers practicing the New Typography and was omitted from Jan Tschichold's *Elementare Typographie* (although the oversight was later rectified in *Die neue Typografie*). In 1925, he was invited to Frankfurt, then a center of progressive practice, as an advertising consultant. While there Dexel published this article on the application of modern typography in a Frankfurt daily newspaper. Like the other well-known progressive manifestos, the article was both a practical and philosophical argument for the rightness of the new methods and a proclamation of ascendancy. Its publication encouraged the directors of the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts) in Magdeburg to appoint Dexel in 1928 to fill the post of director of the commercial art program, where he remained for a decade until the Nazis branded him a “decadent artist” and he was discharged.—SH

The goal of the new typography is an objective and impersonal presentation, free of individuality. In my opinion, neither the imitation of handwriting, nor the use of rare, unusual print, nor the alphabet to which several of our most modern artists attach such great importance, nor new and improved script nor script used only in lower case fulfill this requirement. We have only one duty: to be objective and typical.

Our highest aim is legibility, and our best type is the one which everybody can decipher quickly. If writing in exclusively lower case letters becomes familiar usage, we shall use it, because we realize its economy. However, as long as it requires a special effort on the part of the average reader, it is not the best possible instrument of communication for us.

Our abilities, our taste, or our artistry are of little interest to the public. Science and art are nowadays taken into account much too often. When our message is that coffee is beneficial or that Elizabeth Bergner will appear in the theater tomorrow, or that such-and-such cigarette costs fifty cents, art is not a question.

When information is transmitted over the radio, we do not require that the announcer give us his own pledge, or that he give his voice one tremolo when talking about Elizabeth Bergner and another when he praises Manoli. We would even object to this greatly and beg this gentlemen, “Sir, do talk clearly and make it snappy!”

In my opinion the same holds true for graphic communication. The message has to be clear, objective, and very short. Floods of words and an excessive use of art have taken hold of the field of typography and publicity, and have stifled these basically simple and obvious matters to such a degree that we have to recapture by hard

work, step-by-step, our ability to express something precisely. Only those who are deeply involved in these matters know how hard it is to limit oneself to necessities.

Well-conceived typography transmits a pleasing effect of balance and harmony apart from its contents, which may not be the aim of art, but which shows skill and high-quality workmanship. Our means only seem to be limited; our inability to discriminate is the fault of bad training. We have been bombarded by heavy guns too long. In reality each task requires a particular solution. One can hardly make recipes and we should guard against all dogmas, even the factually correct, such as:

"one reads

from the left top

to the right bottom

and must design

accordingly."

It is not at all essential that a printed communication be read from first word to last in consecutive order. In an announcement of an art club the reader should first learn who is to be exhibited. Then if he is not interested in the artist, he need not read the rest of the announcement.

The announcements of the *Jenaer Kunstverein* shown here serve a double purpose: first they are sent to the homes of club members and second they are converted to posters for display in universities, reading rooms, stores, shop windows, etc., by adding a strip of color glued to cardboard of another color. If it were not essential that they be effective seen from a distance, one could object to the heavy *san serif* lettering, which is not particularly suitable for a postal card.

The block has already become an emblem which the initiated recognize without reading it, and which, therefore, only concerns the stranger. Therefore, apart from the artist's name, only the dates and the information that the works to be shown are watercolors, graphics, paintings, or whatever remain. The arrangement of the single blocks may be necessary but the design need not be monotonous or stereotyped. It is always possible to highlight the most important information by leaving the largest possible empty space around it or by emphasizing particular lines.

In general one understands today by modern media the type (mostly *san serif* in all thicknesses and angles. *Mediaeval-Antiqua*, *Egyptienne*, and a few other clear scripts), the strokes, dots, squares, and arrows available in the printer's letter-case and above all the surrounding empty spaces which we regard as an active factor in achieving contrasts.

On the whole I personally am getting away more and more from the use of strokes and squares in the course of the years. Only in a few cases are they justified. As a rule it is sufficient to have proper distribution of space and great variety in type sizes. There is no doubt that today there is a misuse of lines set at various angles, arrows, squares, and strokes. These serve as crutches and are "modern gestures" which should be rejected as preventing legibility. Used merely decoratively, as happens only too often, these forms are no better than the ornamental borders and the vignettes found at the end of the pro-

KUNSTVEREIN JENA

PRINZESSINNENSCHLÖSSCHEN
MITTWOCHS U. SONNABENDS 3-5, SONNTAGS 11-1
AUßER DER ZEIT FÜHRUNG DURCH DEN HAUSEIGER

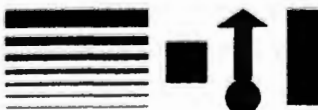
KUNSTVEREIN JENA

PRINZESSINNENSCHLÖSSCHEN
14. DEZEMBER 1924
BIS 11. JANUAR 1925

OSKAR SCHLEMMER

GEWÄLDE ZEICHNUNGEN BÜHNENENTWÜRFE FIGURINEN

Unter modernen Mitteln versteht man heute im allgemeinen neben der Zeile (welch GROTESK in ALLEN STÄRKEN und GRADEN der Mediaeval-Antiqua, der SUTZEN und einigen anderen klaren Schriften) auch die Kette von Strichen, Punkten, Quadraten und Kreisen — kurz allen Zeichen, die sich im Rahmen des Buches finden



gram of a small town glee club. If there is a square in bottom center instead of a birdie, nothing, but nothing, has been gained.

The "unrestrained use of all directions of lines" falls in the same category.

These are childish things which we should have discarded by now. If necessary, the usual familiar words like "Hotel" or "Bar" might be put one below another, but only such words which we already recognize when we have read only two letters. In all cases where we are not limited by space other solutions should be found. They are always possible; it is just cumbersome at times to search for them.

In order to emphasize the general layout, or to clarify and define the text, strokes or heavy lines may sometimes be unavoidable. Then they are justified and necessary, as for instance in the case of the card for *Der Sturm*, where there are a great number of hard-to-arrange names and, therefore, a planned composition is required. This was obviously determined by the capital letter S of the word "Sturm", which appears in the center of the card as large as possible. But this, too, may be regarded as a trifle which one should not repeat too often.

For all designs which have to fulfill other functions besides communication, such as book covers, magazine titles, letterheads, posters, etc., there are, of course, other rules. Communication through letters alone is a limited and specialized field.

In many cases pictorial representations of the objects will be very much to the point. Particularly suitable are all photographic techniques and mechanical reproductions of pictures because they inform us quickly and at the same time in great detail. In the future they will frequently be preferred to words alone.

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