


The Art of the Word

 Visuals | Steven Heller

THE look of a typeface can determine how readers perceive a word or phrase. Take the common seasonal greeting “Happy holidays.” When set in an ornamented Latin style, the words appear jolly and joyous, while spiky Old English or German Fraktur reads as dour — Scrooge-like. Various typefaces symbolize the holidays, and not just those goofy novelty faces with dangling icicles or sprigs of holly. Ecclesiastical gothics, bifurcated Tuscan and filigreed slab serifs are fitting styles for this season. Display types are designed to convey a host of notions and emotions. They are as versatile (and functional) as articles of clothing — and as with clothing, some types are basic black, while others go in and out of fashion like hemlines.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American and European type foundries — the factories where type was designed and cast for commercial and industrial use — churned out literally tons (since type came in lead and wood) of eccentrically decorative typefaces and typographic ornaments, most of it bought by printers. Advertising was a burgeoning industry, and the more outlandish display styles were conceived in equal measure to attract the public’s eye and to distinguish one merchant from the next.

TYPE: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles, Volume I, 1628-1900 (Taschen, \$59.99), edited by Cees W. de Jong, is a collection of exquisitely reproduced pages from an array of lusciously printed vintage foundry specimen books that were used to promote type fonts to commercial printers. Many quirky specimens in this compilation predate the mid-1800s, but most were produced in the second half of the 19th century, when fierce competition among foundries fostered an abundance of smartly designed and ludicrously gaudy faces.

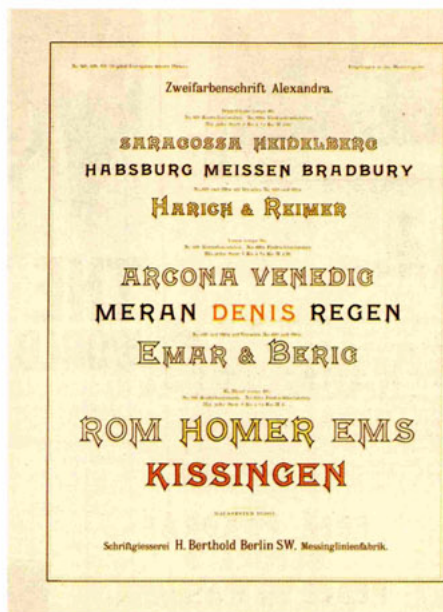
Among professionals, type-specimen books from this era were like Bibles, big leather tomes filled with stunningly illuminated pages. In addition to the sample settings of specific forms (sometimes using actual psalms, other times just random words or nonsense phrases), examples of decorative borders, cartouches and flourishes of all kinds added luster to the printed page. Some of these books defined the Victorian, Art Nouveau and other *fin de siècle* graphic mannerisms. The faces were used for all sorts of everyday purposes: wedding announcements and business cards, posters and packages, medicines and whiskeys. In some there was even a page or two devoted to “black letter” faces designed for newspaper mastheads that looked a lot like The New York Times’s logo.

For the incurious, vintage type books might be a little less exciting than plumbing parts catalogs, but for anybody interested in design, they are jewel boxes filled with incredible riches (and today antiquarian copies are usually priced high). Not surprisingly, some of the ornamental designs found in type books were actually called “printers’ jewels.”

“Type” offers a generous selection of pages from some of the most historically significant and largely forgotten typeface volumes. There are samples culled from H. Berthold, the most famous German foundry at the turn of the 20th century and beyond, and a collection of optically distorted faces from the esteemed Enschede foundry

in the Netherlands. Most type books of this era sold the same fundamental materials; nonetheless, each country represented in this volume — Germany, France, England, the United States, the Netherlands — had its own distinct typographic idioms. Since type was so heavy and expensive to transport, getting the latest Parisian or German import to New York was something of an event, and was aggressively promoted through posters and brochures. While “Type” does not delve as deeply as it might into the history of these artifacts (the introductory essays, printed in German and French as well as English, give only a modicum of context), as the subtitle states, this is a “visual” confection devoted to milestones that defined the typographic language of the times.

These days, noncommercial artists — painters, printmakers, conceptual artists — are as obsessed with type as graphic designers are. The fascination started in the early 20th century, when Cubists, Futurists and Dadaists cut up pieces of standard type specimens and included random bits and pieces in their paintings and periodicals. Type was at once a substitute for paint and a method of integrating textual language into art.



From “Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles, Volume I, 1628-1900.”