

Type. A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles Vol.1

Let us consider the letter A. We must take the simple, three-lined capital A, because the lowercase a is not only complicated by curvy lines but it also comes in two distinct popular forms, one with a straight line at the right of the loop and one in which the line curves over the loop like an umbrella. So, I say, consider the A. Three straight lines, two leaning together up to a point, and one horizontal connecting their midsections. This is the Platonic A, the essence, and you'd know it anywhere. But if you start looking at the huge number of examples of A (and every other letter) in *Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles, Volume 1, 1628-1900* (Taschen), you may get the idea that that exemplar A can't really stand for much because there are too many variables. There are some letters A that have no straight lines (or are made up of flowers, or cartoons of heads), there are plenty that have no pointy top, there are lots that have more than three lines to them (it would take 20th century fonts to produce letters A with less than three lines), and so on. The book is edited by Cees W. de Jong, and it features examples of metal type specimens from the collection of the late Jan Tholenaar. Both these authors have written essays to provide a little context, but it is very little, compared to the 250 pages of print specimens, handsomely laid out in a big format on rich paper, between covers of canvas with the title and design stamped into it. This is a handsome object throughout.

Despite the subtitle, *Type* is not really a history of type, though in his preface and introductory essay, de Jong does provide brief context. He concentrates, however, on the fonts you would find in an ordinary printed book which you would sit down and read. Those of us who like finding a colophon at the end of the book to tell us about the font used will be familiar with many of the names in de Jong's little history, both because they are names of artists in letters and because their names have been used for subsequent fonts in tribute. First mentioned is William Caslon, who in 1720 at age 28 produced a fine Roman letter alphabet. (The serifs he used, as in all fonts before, were a carryover from the flow of writing with a pen. It is amazing to me that the new, simpler sans serif fonts did not appear in England until 1816.) In 1754, John Baskerville was 48 when he brought out the first of his famous typefaces, spacious and formal; Baskerville took special interest in letterforms, of course, but also in ink and paper. Giambattista Boldoni produced a collection of 665 different alphabets, published in 1818 after his death; there are over 500 fonts bearing in tribute Boldoni as part of their names. An acquaintance of Boldoni said, "In the evenings, conversing with his friends and in distinguished company, during meals, he was always busy with his typefaces, justifying a matrix, filing a die, designing a capital." My preferred font for typing on the computer, Times New Roman, was produced by Stanley Ignatius Arthur Morison in 1931, for the London *Times* after the paper's manager heard that Morison "had made scathing remarks about the paper's outdated typography." De Jong's history ends with Max Miedinger's Helvetica which was produced in 1960 and filled a huge need for a subdued sans serif typeface. It is also the only font that has had a documentary film dedicated to it (and it's a good movie!). De Jong asks, "The question is, has the ideal typeface been invented yet?" He doesn't give the answer, but I will: Yes, countless times; and No, because there will always be attempts at new ones.

When Caslon developed his fonts, for Roman letters and also for Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and more, he printed sample sheets so printers could see and evaluate his work. The practice of

sending sample fonts in specimen books continued, and such books are what Jan Tholenaar used to collect. Reproductions from those pages form the bulk of *Type*. You know how Victorian décor for houses involved cramming lots of things into a room, things that had sometimes outrageous layers of decorative detail; it is fun to see that the same sort of exuberance is all over the pages here. After all, these are really only pages of catalogues, specialist catalogues for printers representing the narrowest of niche marketing, but they are astonishingly full of invention and brash showing-off. Such displays befit the period, and naturally the often anonymous artists who designed the decorative letters and flourishes shown here wanted to push limits. Besides letters, there are vignettes, a word which I know to mean “a little picture” or “a small description,” but which before such meanings designated for the world of printers an ornamental design used to separate chapters or other divisions in a book, or a picture on the page unenclosed in a border. (The authors do not refer to “dingbats”, which was a term of derision before printers began using it to mean a bit of ornamental type.)

The majority of letters here are display types, meant not for the ease of reading which Boldoni and Baskerville had in mind, but for amusement and show. Many would have been at home in circus posters, for instance. There are “black letter” faces that were used for things like newspaper mastheads, and even black letters that seem to be three dimensional. There are many experiments with three dimensions, with letters seemingly viewed from above, below, or to the side, sticking out from the page, or sticking into the page, or on long banners with one wave for each letter. There are calligraphic letters (and plenty of curlicue vignettes), and stencil forms, and letters that look as if they came from illuminated manuscripts, and many letters made of flowers. Some letters are populated by cupids, and some are held up by caryatids. There are letters of stripes vertical, horizontal, and diagonal, there is hatchwork, there are letters that seem to be puzzles that you have to work hard to understand. Sometimes full advertisements are reproduced, but often the letters are set in random words on a page, producing a sort of Dadaist poetry; every word on one of the pages here is in a completely different style, and the page reads:

COMET MATURE
MIST HOSE
BARN DIMES
HER MEN
NILE KINE

There are borders made out of flowers or abstract flourishes, or ones that look like bits of architecture, machinery, or draperies. There are pages of vignettes devoted to horses, to jesters, to clothing, to hands pointing left and to hands pointing right. Purchasers of this book might miss one of its most attractive assets. Sealed into the back cover is a “key card” with a password that will allow you to go to Taschen’s website, where are archived over a thousand high-resolution scans of specimens in the book, and they are “downloadable for unrestricted use.” The pages, and the website, ought to be particularly appreciated by those who work in printing and design, but are intoxicating even for those of us who just like seeing fancy letters beautifully presented.

Rob Hardy