

# Reviews



Above: covers for the two volumes of *Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles*. Below: lavish Parisian type specimen created by Fonderie G. Renault Fils in 1890, reproduced from vol. 1.

## Formal richness for the tablet age

**Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles**  
Vol. 1 1628-1900, Vol. 2 1901-1938

Edited by Cees W. de Jong, with texts by Jan Tholenaar, Cees W. de Jong and Alston W. Purvis  
*Taschen*, £34.99 each

Reviewed by Gerry Leonidas

Open the Pages interface on an iPad and look at the menu bars: the tab stops are in a Scotch Roman with ball terminals and curling strokes but the bars are in two different patterns of fake leather. The type style suggests some richness of form but the fake leather is unimaginative and shallow.

Borders and patterns are only one example of the way typographic design has become less inventive in the past fifteen years. For every sublime piece by Marian Bantjes (see pp.72-77), there will be thousands of exercises in bleeding gradients and uncoordinated rules. Ornament and pattern have had a long history of adding visual depth and context across all genres of text, but we seem to have excised this chapter of visual language from the accepted styles of contemporary typography. (Indeed, you could argue that Bantjes' work misses the point, since it makes complexity the very centrepiece of design.)

Taschen's new book based on Jan Tholenaar's private collection of 'diverse letters and ornaments with examples of artistic printing' is a reminder that we have neglected this complexity for too long. *Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles* which comes in two substantial volumes that cover the period 1628-1938, is gratifyingly personal. There is little to suggest that the material collected is in any way delimited by genre, technique, industry, or subject matter. The overriding imperative for Tholenaar's collection seems to have been his admiration for originality and inventiveness. The collection is also open in its potential for interpretation: essays at the beginning of the volumes do not attempt to circumscribe the collection. If there is one message, it is 'here's some stuff, see what you make of it'.

The images of type specimens here are mostly of display type, accompanied by vignettes, borders and ornaments with an astonishing inventiveness in both structure and detail. Ornament and decoration are difficult to weave linear narratives for, and this has contributed to their relative absence from typographic history. These inhabitants of the back pages of specimen books are consigned to footnotes by every theoretician out to excise ornament and decoration from 'serious' design, and ignored in the thirst for new, a-historical forms. But their substantial presence in specimen books, at least partly reflecting a demand, is an indication that the 'typography as crystal goblet' argument is selective and self-serving: here is a reminder that design is rich, layered and too messy for easy categorisation. Despite our enthusiasm for Modernism, designers

also value complexity and intricacy: witness the warm reception guaranteed any conference presentation that includes images of street lettering from India.

Typeface design today often confuses competence in using the tools with confidence to make good design decisions. It has become quite common to discuss the functional aspects of typefaces, which, at its most pedestrian, has taken the guise of an obsession with measuring the readability of typefaces, for the most part ignoring macro typography, language and context of use – all uncomfortably complex and difficult to express in neat little experiments. At the other end, functionalism produces type families with huge ranges of weights and variants, jacks-of-all-trades that absolve the designer from having an opinion on how their typeface should be used. The unevenness of the examples here reacquaints us with the brilliance of the Monotype Grottesque family, or the early designs of The Foundry.

A focus on the functional often disguises a lack of engagement with typographic context: typefaces have become objects of creation in themselves, rather than tools to enrich a typographic language where communication and expression walk hand in hand. Given the ever greater number of people designing typefaces, should we not be flooded with surprising, inventive forms? But even in its simplest form, as an inspired re-absorption of forgotten norms and assimilation into the mainstream of past experimental forms, typographic originality seems to suffer. (Otherwise, would there be space for Neville Brody's 'Anti-Design Festival' to remind us of a lost radicalism?)

At least one cause of the problem is the vacuum in which typographic design is taking place today: not knowing what happened twenty years ago, let alone a century or two.

However, design is not only defined by responses to a continuum of contributions by peers but also by a recognition that this stream of output is potentially vast in its range, unclassifiable in its profusion, and endless in its sources. These *Taschen* books remind us that to design while ignoring the wealth of forms of the nineteenth century is professionally shallow and blinkered.

These volumes can be a source of unbridled inspiration for typeface designers as well as typographers, and a reminder to designers working in a relatively conservative time that there is plenty of room for invention.

As for those who say 'it's all been done before', these volumes go further, pointing out that, in many ways, more was done before.

As they are, the two volumes would be a good enough addition to any designer's library to merit their modest cost but there is a considerable bonus: with every book comes a key card with which to access all the images in the collection free of copyright, and in reasonably high resolution. (It is possible to search by location, period or foundry, but the online interface is as agnostic as the print edition.) The serendipitous discoveries of browsing the print edition are now instant, no-effort raw material for new designs. Of course, we will see the obvious: tracing examples to make new typefaces that skirt a bit too close to the originals, with little

consideration for the effects of technique. But the wide availability of these images online, and the sheer scale of the collection, can induce a rebirth of complexity and patterning in typographic design.

This material is released into the wild at an opportune moment, just as mid-format portable devices are hitting the mainstream. Where the iPhone promotes a distillation of the interface to save valuable space, the larger scale of the iPad invites designers to experiment with visually rich, complex documents. The wealth of typographic detail in the Taschen books hits designers at the exact moment when they are trying to figure out how to translate identity and style in a mutable interface. It would not be surprising if the formal richness represented in the books triggered a revival of asymmetric borders and subtle patterning as a unifying element in typographic design across media.

There is nothing new in this material: it is all to be seen, freely, in London's St Bride Library and many other institutions supporting historical research. And there are omissions. It would be easy, for example, to include a visual indicator for the scale of the originals ('that much bigger than this book you're holding') and so on. But what would be essential in a research-intensive publication, is less absent here; there is an inviting lack of pretentiousness. In addition, the free and easy access to raw material cannot be underestimated. These books propel the imagination in new directions, and are more fun to go through than most design annuals. Check them out, and improve on Apple's dreadful fake leather.



Right: spread from vol. 2, showing examples of Deutsche Anzeigerschrift (1924), a popular textura lettering style in Germany during a gothic revival of calligraphy, including an advert for brakes ('Sichere Bremse'). Below: spread from vol. 1, showing type specimens and ornaments from 1835, as featured in an influential trade journal established by Johann Heinrich Meyer.

