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## TYPE DESIGN

By FREDERIC W. GOUDY

*The address below was delivered at Rutgers on March 19, the first in a series sponsored by the Associated Friends as part of the celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of printing from movable type. The celebration was appropriately opened by Mr. Goudy, foremost American type designer, during the week that specimens of his own work were on exhibit in the Rutgers Library.*

IN THE printing craft in its larger aspect, it is life and nothing less with which we have to deal; it is life that you are called upon to foster and to mould, since printing moulds our minds, expands our vision and heaps up knowledge. Printing is one of the greatest means of promoting education, and education is not only one of the finest but one of the greatest of the arts; it is indeed the mother art, the alma mater of genius, the preceptress of intelligence and the foster parent of life.

For almost forty years I have preached the gospel of simplicity, of dignity, of legibility, of beauty, in types and typographical arrangement, and only now am I beginning to believe that my words so freely dispensed through the years, those arrows of typographic thought shot into the air—have not fallen to earth unnoticed or completely disregarded.

Stephen Vincent Benet, speaking of writing as a trade, makes what seems to me to be a significant statement, that "most of us begin by thinking we can do it all on *desire*, and are horribly disappointed when we fail." His statement applies equally to the matter of designing a type. In the case of writing, it would seem to be little more than carefully arranging a number of words on paper. But no, it is more than that, it requires one essential at least, an individual *creative* impulse.



FREDERIC W. GOUDY

When a man skillful with his hands produces things and talks with candor about his methods of work, he usually is worth listening to, but that he knows his work thoroughly does not necessarily qualify him to write or speak of it interestingly. There is still something else necessary besides technical knowledge and deftness in use of tools: there should be in him a logical sense, a feeling for the richness in words, an appreciation of their sounds, and their rhythmical sequence as well—and he must learn to write or speak intelligently of his work even as he learned his methods of work, by study and practise in the use of words.

The type designer by nature may be apt, but that fact will not of itself cause him to avoid anachronisms; he must know the history of letters, the development of type, what has been done by others, and possess too, an ability to seize upon the things in their work that he needs in his own—the quirks and turns that have caught his attention and fired his imagination, not, however, to copy them but to fuse them in the fire of his own thought into new type creations.

I do not consider myself a printer, nor even a typographer, although occasionally I do print, but I have studied assiduously the work of the great printers and of the great type designers of the past. I have studied them that I might pursue my own work intelligently, since I am no Heaven-born genius. Yet even a great genius does not trust entirely to the resources of his own mind. Just as a great composer borrows another's theme only to make it his own by the originality of his setting, so the great designer ransacks a thousand minds and uses the findings and wisdom of the ages to amplify and extend the boundaries of his own mental and artistic limitations. The genius who wisely recognizes precedent does not find it necessary to imitate his exemplars slavishly; he studies their achievements that he may add to his own store of ideas and he draws with independence from the most varied sources.

No art, no great printing, no great type ever developed by the rejections of the canons of good design found in the work of preceding generations. Style, distinction, originality have grown invariably out of a preceding style, not merely by taking thought but developing by gradual modification of older work to meet the changed conditions of a later time, the new work hardly betraying its origin.

As some of you already know, I am a designer of types. Now type design is a minor art, if it can be called an art at all; one thing, how-

ever, is certain: good type design may be practised only by an artist with peculiar capabilities, one of which is highly essential, the ability to discover beauty in abstract forms—the forms on which he lavishes his art, the shapes that have developed from the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt, that have evolved from the work of the ninth century scribes, and which now constitute the common medium of communication that recalls to us the wisdom of the past and preserves the knowledge of today for future generations. The shapes we call letters are now classic and we should not tamper with their essential forms unduly lest we compel readers to acquaint themselves with a new literary currency. The letter-norm, that is, the mere letter stripped of everything except its primitive and essential corpus, we may, if we have taste, and culture, and feeling, clothe and make presentable, more modest, not necessarily more useful, but better suited to the thought it is to convey. But alas! letter-norms may be badly clothed, and by that I mean the clothing that gives us the tawdry, the bizarre, the fanciful atrocities—I had almost said “monstrosities”—so often seen; their use disturbs my sense of fitness and actually decreases their usefulness in my eyes.

The types intended for fine printing, in the main, are not different in form from those intended specifically for commerce; the difference lies more in the handling of them, and the commercial printer will do well to avoid any effort toward pseudo-estheticism; he should attempt rather to present printing with its own proper goodness for the purposes intended, studiously plain and starkly efficient. Printing for commerce, to be good, requires the types and the handling of them to be free from studied exuberance and fancy. When printing for industry is too elaborate or too fanciful it becomes inexcusable; the greater is its vulgarity of display, the more distasteful it appears, and its impertinent indecency I find almost nauseating.

There was a time in the golden age of type design when a page decoration, a head-piece, a fleuron, or a new type face might prove a key to typographic distinction because it was recognized as the work of a master and respected accordingly. But by this I do not imply that deference must necessarily be given to old types or old work of little merit merely because they are old. Many of them unfortunately possess shortcomings even as those of later vintage. Yet, even the best of old types should not be revived, imitated, adapted, reproduced or copied for

present day use, with camera-like fidelity, *prima facie* evidence of modern poverty of invention (or artistic or mental laziness). The originals had matchless charm because they were stamped with the personality of their makers; the reproductions invariably lack the spirit of idealism of the originators and cannot fail to betray the fact that the faker can never do entire justice to the distinctive qualities that made the original designs great. My own feeling regarding the endless reviving of old type is the same feeling I have toward dead and living art—or toward dead and living literature—the new type built on old forms never transcends them and is always imitative, never moving with spontaneous energy that is indicative of freshness and originality.

The inexperienced designer says to himself, "I will design a new type." He does not as yet realize that just as a painter wishing to paint a tree must also imagine a sky or a background against which to see it standing, the designer, too, cannot imagine a type unless he imagines also its use and destination. He must have visions whose power is his power. He must treat what is logical as if it were a miracle; yet as a matter of fact what he is attempting to give new form to is something which has long been in the background of his mind, perhaps without his being conscious of the fact, and what he has studied in the past work of the great masters of type and printing, he has now only to recall and give form to as something which already is there.

And now a few words about fine printing in its relation to fine literature. Fine literature, being permanent, demands a dignified and beautiful typographical setting, a setting that will preserve the author's words in monumental form suited to their worth. Printing may be adequate and entirely satisfactory for commercial necessities; yet even that printing on which the craftsman has exercised more than usual thought and care for technical requirements, or upon which elaborate details have been lavished, may, after all, be merely good printing; fine printing requires even more than the points I mention: for it, type, decoration, and proportion of page should be appropriate to the subject treated; its destination and its purpose should receive equally the craftsman's most scrupulous and fastidious attention. In that printing where the types are correctly chosen and their arrangement good; the capitals harmonious and suited to the type and the text; the paper pleasing to the eye in tone, pliable to the hand, its surface kind to the types and unobtrusive

as to wire-marks, and the presswork admirable, the final result may be altogether charming and even yet not fine, in the sense that a work of art is fine. Printing to be fine and not merely charming must include a beauty of proportion whereon the trained taste finds ever an appeal to delight; a beauty of form and rhythm in consonance, showing the control of the craftsman over every detail of the work, a well proportioned leaf whereon the type has been handsomely placed, the lines well spaced, the decorations harmonious (no detail pretending or seeming to be more important than the thing adorned), and of like origin with the types, cut with like tools, and with similar strokes. Fine printing, too, is simple in arrangement, not the simplicity gained by pretending simplicity, but rather the result of simple thinking; the work must be fundamentally beautiful by force of the typography itself, its beauty organic and a development of its construction; it must be done on a fine type, and it *must have style*, the living expression controlling both the form and structure of the vehicle which reveals and preserves the author's words. Printing becomes only then an art, a means even to higher aims and higher ideals.

I have spoken of a fine type in the foregoing summing up—I am tempted to repeat what I have said so often regarding the type I regard as "fine":

Type to be fine must be legible, not merely readable, but pleasantly and easily legible; decorative in form, but not ornate; beautiful in itself and in company of its kinsman in the font; austere and formal, but with no stale or uninteresting regularity in its dissimilar characters; simple in design, but not the bastard simplicity that is mere crudity of outline, elegant, that is, gracious in line; fluid in form, but not archaic; and above all it must possess unmistakably the quality called "art," which is the spirit the designer puts into the body of his work, the product of his study and of his taste.

How many of the types demanded by the advertisers or their typographic advisers will permit an analysis of this sort? Many types employed today in the attempt to make the work for which they are employed appear better than it is, that is, to give the manner of a fine book to mere advertising or commercial work are to me nauseating. Advertising is one thing, and bookmaking is another; each should have its own treatment.

But now to get back to my own method of thought regarding a type face. When a designer of type faces attempts to tell others what his ideas are regarding his craft, he ought to make very clear at the outset that he speaks only of what he, himself, considers a type's good qualities to be. What he says is his personal opinion and he should not lay down dogmatic rules for others. If he is a designer of established standing, I believe he invariably regards type as something made primarily to be read and not as something made merely to exhibit the craft and skill of its creator. His ideal of merit is not necessarily that of mechanical precision or of exact finish. Yet, easy reading should not be the ultimate aim entirely; type should be pleasantly readable also; and at this point, opinions of readers, printers, and type designers begin to diverge as to what constitutes legibility, beauty, and those other qualities, which I, personally, demand, the qualities of simplicity, dignity, and style.

There is no mystery in type design. It is so easy that I am surprised that more people do not take it up as a profession, unless, it may be, the returns are usually inadequate to attract artists of ability. For myself I have found it a pleasant road at times toward dignified starvation.

A young man wrote to the *Chicago Tribune* asking what he should do to become a first-class proof-reader and received this reply: To become a first-class proof-reader is a very easy task—so easy that the wonder is that more young people don't take it up instead of clerking. The first step is to serve an apprenticeship at printing which will enable the student to discern typographical irregularities. A general acquaintance with history, biography, poetry, fiction, music, geography, the drama, and other branches of learning is important. Politics should have attention, for you must be able to identify every man who has followed the business from Cain down to the present. No matter whether he is the Premier of England, or the Caliph of Bagdad, or a celebrated prize-fighter, you must have a minute knowledge of his public and private life and be able to select the proper spelling from the half-dozen forms the author is sure to employ. Read, ponder, and assimilate Webster, the Bible, Shakespeare, Anthon's Classical Dictionary, Roget's Thesaurus, Lippincott's Gazetteer, the encyclopedias of Zell, Appleton, and others. During the long winter evenings take up a few languages—say Greek, Latin, French, Russian, German, Chinese, and Choctaw.

In the same way one wishing to begin as a type designer need only to interest himself in the beginning of the alphabet, starting with the hieroglyphs of Egypt and coming down to the best work of the mediæval scribes, and in the invention of typography; to recognize the great type faces of Jenson, Garamond, Fournier, Bodoni, Caslon, Baskerville, et al.; to know the great periods of printing in Germany, Italy, England, France, Holland, and so forth. And then, if he has the ability to draw lines of vigor, instinct with delicacy, refinement, and life, a feeling for design and good tradition, good taste and a sense of practicality, imagination, and a few other like odds and ends, he is ready to begin. All that remains is a commission to design type—ah! there is the rub. It is much easier to make a type than it is to sell it.

The late Col. Ingraham, probably one of the most prolific writers of the stirring dime novels of the 70's and 80's when asked how he wrote so many, replied that it was "quite easy." To illustrate he said, "crack, crack, crack and three red skins bit the dust—and then you go on from there." In the same way the making of a type design is quite easy. The materials for the new design are simple: pencil, paper, and ink are cheap; then one has only to think of a letter and draw around the thought—and then you go on from there. The great difficulty lies in thinking of 25 other letters to go with it in complete harmony, to make each seem to be the kin of every other in the font and of all. If the designer has studied his letters, if he has imagination, if he has taste, if he has a feeling for line, proportion, rhythm, he may make an acceptable design, but even then, too often it may prove not all that is wanted.

A good type, I regret, is not the result of a mere desire to design one. It is difficult to visualize a large drawing as actual type, and while experience helps, it does not always insure success. Many of my drawings never see the light of day, since like the doctors, I can bury my own mistakes.

If only there were some definite and positive item that one might introduce into a design that would ensure its legibility or beauty. These qualities, alas, are more often the result of accident than of deliberate and conscious effort, and I speak with the experience of years and over a hundred types to my credit as a basis for the statement. If such qualities could be introduced simply by taking thought, there would be fewer bad types, since who would be so foolish as to draw any not good?



I hope that in these rambling remarks will be found here and there grains of thought among the chaff; and that what I have said may not fall entirely on deaf ears. I realize that I have little facility of expression; yet my words are not those of an esthetic theorist, they are the conclusions of a practical craftsman—practical in the sense that with my own hands, from blank paper to printed page I perform every detail of my work, and the principles presented here are those that guide me in my work. I endeavor by precept and example to bring about a greater public interest in good typography, to arouse a more general esteem for better types, and I have never intentionally permitted myself to utilize the message I was attempting to present as a mere framework upon which to exploit my own work, nor even to allow my handicraft to become an end in itself instead of a means to a desirable and useful end.

I have seen somewhere a statement by William Morris that appeals to me as one of especial significance. I am continually coming upon sayings of his that appeal to me, just as Emerson was constantly coming upon sentences in the works of Bacon which were “like doors suddenly opening upon some endless vista of the mind.” Morris’s sentences present craft and craftsmanship to me with new force.

Morris said, in substance, “Men whose hands were skilled in fashioning things could not help thinking while they worked, and they soon found that deft fingers unconsciously would express some part of the tangle of their thoughts in the work they were doing—that in doing so, they had conquered somewhat the curse of mere toil. Their own thoughts and the thoughts of men long gone guide their hands—and they create.”

As I work, I like to think of the potentialities of the sculptured abstractions which grow under my hand, that each letter with its kinsman in the future font will enable the poet to put into tangible and visible form the fine frenzy of his mind, will preserve the hived honey of the departed genius, and present the happenings of today that those who follow may picture accurately what otherwise might be lost forever.