

On Reading Jan Tschichold's "The New Typography"

Tschichold's 1928 book is a clarion call of modernism, of Jacobin impatience with empty decorative forms in all the arts. He has a long chapter on the way cubism, futurism, dada & the Bauhaus have liberated us from the soulless rococo art that burgeoned at the end of the 19th century. All the arts had been flooded with superficial copying of old styles...and capricious design. He argues that typography too must rid itself of all non-instrumental junk, & look to engineering as a template.

"The Arts & Crafts style of the 1870s & 1880s had to be defeated; form must emerge purely from purpose, construction, material.."

"Just as it is absurd today to build villas like rococo palaces or gothic castles, so people tomorrow will smile at those who continue to practice the old typography."

There are quotes from a manifesto, "Free Expression Orthography", by the futurist, Marinetti...with examples of posters inspired by that vision.

"Our lyrical power must be free to re-form words by abbreviation or lengthening, strengthen middle or end, increase or reduce consonants & vowels..."

An irony of reading the book is to know that Tschichold eventually ended up as the chief of book design at Penguin Books and settled on a quiet formal beauty for the title pages and covers, which he later wrote up as a manual of correct book design with numerous Laws and Conventions. Not anywhere near the visions of Marinetti...but a familiar arc in an artist's life. The manifesto of purity begins to look extreme as one engages the wheel of life as it is...or as the historic moment decisively passes into retrograde. Or one gets a great job and adapts.

The book is all in sans-serif type and manifests the kind of energy derived from direct communicative forms. But as with many such leaps of utopian vision, there is a razing intensity that would burn off the crop entirely. I feel it as he turns his beam toward 'decoration'. Tschichold talks about the essence of New Typography as "Clarity, asymmetry, sans-serif faces..."

Here he is on ornament: "Its use comes from childish naiveté...it shows a reluctance to use pure design...a giving-in to a primitive instinct to decorate.."

He quotes the architect Adolf Loos(described thusly in a reference book: "Loos argued against decoration by pointing to economic and historical reasons for its development, and by describing the suppression of decoration as necessary to the regulation of passion. He believed that culture resulted from the renunciation of passions and that which brings man to the absence of ornamentation generates spiritual power.")

"The more primitive a people, the more extravagantly they use ornament & decoration. The Indian overloads everything, every boat, rudder, arrow, with ornament. To insist on decoration is to put yourself on the same level as an Indian"....Loos

That stops me dead. Here you have the pivot-point for all the 20th century brain-fevers. To sweep across the planet like a purifying angel . . . one has no patience for the gnarled and quirking forms of humanity or nature itself. Vacuuming with industrial force, one can obsess on the specks that somehow do not go away– in this case the 'Indians'. Eventually the concept of 'levels' comes up, doesn't it? We, the Prometheans, we're on a higher level. It isn't surprising that Tschichold recanted and settled into life at Penguin and the serifs after World War II. All such thoughts had reason then to be in a state of chastisement.

It was true that fin-de-siecle mainstream arts were repugnant in their superficiality and mannerism. Revolt against these styles was rife, and of course was paralleled by an insurrection against the entire economic system. The

excesses of the revolt show everywhere too, and led to almost equally ludicrous creations. The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat”? Bauhaus apartment buildings?

To identify the very existence of ornament as the Enemy is a fatal mistake of mind. It leads to the sterility of sans-serif types and the coldness of modern industrial pages. An interesting sidelight is that in recent studies of reading comprehension, sans-serif types always score lower than the serif types. Theorists believe that the horizontal gestures of the serifs may lead the eye & mind forward across the text where the sans serifs tend to drop one down vertically between type faces. There is less connectivity.

*“Oh Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker’s rage to order the words of the sea...”* –Wallace Stevens

Are the serifs like Jews? Africans? germs? Do they signal “*words of the fragrant portals*” – that will contaminate? That are unruly & not functional?

One can see the underlying sensation, that the world was being re-engineered, and the forms were seductive and purposeful. Bridges and submarines, airplanes, skyscrapers. Wow. What frippery it was to pine for the Edwardian graces. If we are a mechanical culture, why not learn to love its forms? There are tool & die makers who are great sculptors. Why pretend you are still promenading in arbors of filigree with your pinafore? That’s a clear and necessary rebuke to a puffed-up culture. But...we want Bread...and roses too.

The beauty of adornment, its calligraphic intelligence in non-industrial cultures...is so far from the clay target these men make of it that they cannot see it. One could easily turn Loos’ statement right back at him and his tribe: “these barbaric people, they do not even adorn their boats, their rudders, their bowls.”

Give me a choice of living in a Bauhaus apartment...or a village of the Makah people on the Coast of Washington in 1485...and I go to the Makah with no hesitation. I enter a lodge through the mouth of a great Bear, I paddle one of those magnificent graven canoes with my ‘decorated’ paddle...wearing a Raven mask. ... could it be any clearer? And you call that ‘childish naiveté’?

To unite image and thought, dreamtime and waking life...what more can we hope for? IF there is a point, Seurat, it might be: do not expunge the decorative desire. Bring it into Sense, into union with the flow of a book, a story, a page. How could Tschichold not see that... in those great Renaissance book pages? The Emblems, the differing typefaces, the narrowing columns and graceful Ornaments. The very thing that all the world still reveres in type design, the Romans and italics of Aldus, Arrighi, Jenson, all conceived with a deft, gracefully-serifed devotion to beauty.

The writings they were printing; the works of Plato, the poems of Petrarch; it was a perfect marriage of form to substance. Ornamented... as if one were carefully inscribing the totemic sea-mammals on one’s canoe. There is plenty of time for purity in the grave...but let’s have some serifs on the R.I.P.

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