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Contemporary Book Design: 1

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# CONTEMPORARY BOOK DESIGN: 1

*by Alvin Lustig*

In using the term contemporary books, I do not refer to books produced in our time, but rather to books that reflect the basic esthetic concepts peculiar to our time. In this sense contemporary book design is still a rarity, which fact is not difficult to explain. The book has a long and noble tradition; it developed without interruption until the beginning of the twentieth century when suddenly it was confronted by tremendous technical changes and new esthetic principles which it was ill-prepared to absorb.

Rooted in handicrafts, committed to the Roman letter form and to classic symmetry, book design, of all the visual arts, was the one least susceptible to the influence of this century's esthetic and technical innovations. So, while almost every phase of our physical environment—our architecture, our transportation and our methods of communication—has changed its form drastically in the past fifty years, the book today has essentially the same physical form it had two centuries ago. So, too, it is no accident that most of the designers who have made an important mark on the format of the contemporary book have come from other fields of design such as architecture, industrial design and painting. All of these design areas have been involved in the dynamic and vital changes so typical of this century.

A characteristic of the tradition of fine book making has been its close alliance with scholarship and humanism. Persistent emphasis on the "word" rather than on the "visual symbol" has slowly made an art that was once the glory of the visual lapse into an art com-

prising the weakest of "literary" and antiquarian elements. If one goes back far enough—to very early printing or even to early manuscripts—one finds a richness and power of form more closely allied to a truly modern sensibility than are the polite books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One thinks, for example, of the great Irish manuscript dating about the eighth century, the Book of Kells. Its distortions and decoration, use of drawing, unusual margins, richness of texture and general principles of organization make it seem more contemporary with us than do manuscripts and books of a much later date.

It is in European countries most removed from the English tradition, which placed its stress on the "word," that we find the beginnings of contemporary book design. Shortly after the turn of the century, with the new architecture as a stimulus, Germany was already beginning to break the matrix of traditional design, and by the late 'twenties in that country one encountered books in a rather mature modern idiom—for example, those the Bauhaus produced. Meanwhile, in Czechoslovakia, the state design school in Prague was producing extremely fine work under the direction of Ladislav Sutnar. And, strongly influenced by constructivist painting and sculpture, Jan Tschichold was evolving principles of contemporary typography which still seem fresh and alive today.

In the general field of publishing, the "vulgar" arts of advertising, promotional design and periodical design were far in advance of the art of the book. Because

*Top: Title page from Jan Tschichold's*  
TYPOGRAPHISCHE GESTALTUNG, published in 1935.

*A typical example of the elegance and control found in this master's early work.*  
*Center: An early Bauhaus book designed by Adolph Meyer and dating from 1924. An example of the simple, strong, mechanistic style which characterized Bauhaus work and which still exerts an influence today.*

*Bottom: FRANZ KAFKA AND PRAGUE by Pavel Eisner, a 1950 design by Ladislav Sutnar, one of the modern pioneers. An instance of the modern designer's characteristic disinterest in the classic conceptions of type mass and margins.*

*Von Tschichold:*

## Typographische Gestaltung

Benno Schwabe & Co., Basel 1935

## BAUHAUSBÜCHER

SCHRIFTLEITUNG:  
WALTER GROPIUS  
L. MOHOLY-NAGY

EIN VERSUCHSHAUS DES BAUHAUSES  
IN  
WEIMAR

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## EIN VERSUCHSHAUS DES BAUHAUSES IN WEIMAR

ZUSAMMENGESTELLT VON  
ADOLF MEYER

ALBERT LANGEN VERLAG MÜNCHEN

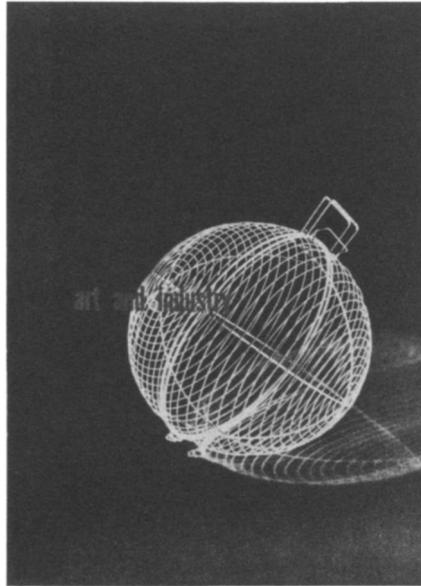
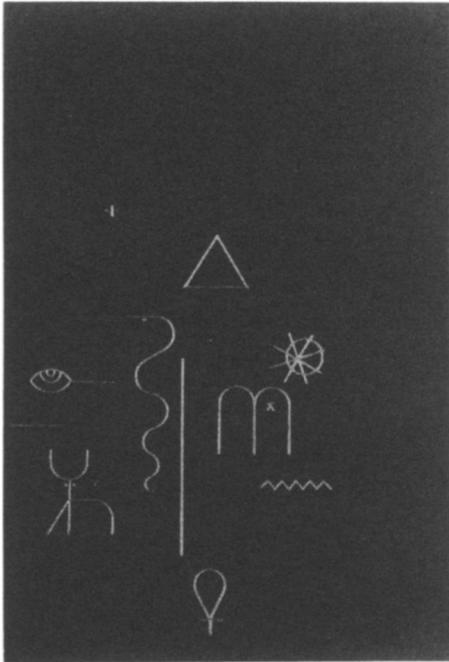
the Powder Tower, the usual district of street prostitution in Prague. It is quite irrelevant how often Franz Kafka took flight from such girls, how often he did not, whether he always remained the constant prince and always went sensibly and morally home when his friends or visitors in Prague wanted to carry on freely until dawn. There is something else much more important.

[THE GIRLS OF PRAGUE] Every ancient city has a high erotic tension; this is as true of Prague as of Vienna, of Venice as of Paris. There is something particular in the case of Prague. "The girls of Prague are pretty" not only in that flourishing old Viennese nightclub song. By that "pretty" in the Viennese ballad is meant the erotic charm of the Slavic girl; and the ballad has antecedents about which its maker could hardly have dreamt: ever since the Middle Ages from the mouths and pens of foreigners has come a veritable multitude of enthusiastically inspired testimonies of admiration for the girls of Prague. In this,

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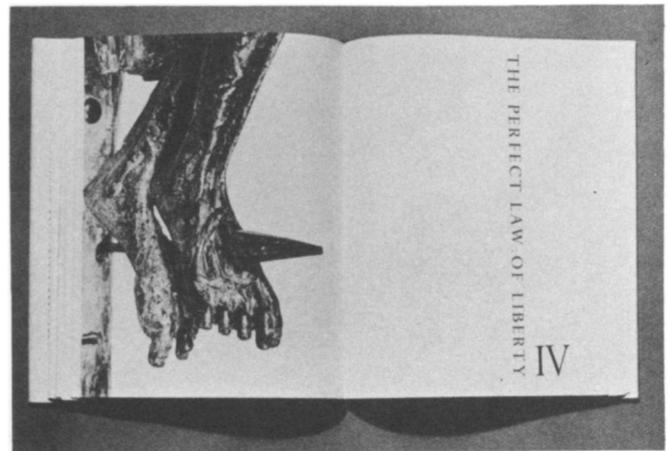
visitors from Germany are particularly emphatic, for the Czech women of Prague impress them as a true revelation. I cannot let my remarks become swollen with irrelevant details, and so, neglecting the many German enthusiasts and other foreigners, let us mention only Andersen—yes, the great and perennially beloved Hans Christian Andersen, the Andersen of the fairy tales. On August 18, 1834 he rode in a coach through the streets of Prague and called out, beside himself with rapture, in horribly garbled Czech, to the right and to the left, "Pretty maid, I love you!" [EROTIC SYMBIOSIS] A woman, far more than a man, is the quintessence of her people and race. A foreign mode of life, repellent and at the same time attractive, is embodied at its greatest concentration in women. At the bottom of the ancient worldwide barbarous violation of women carried out by the conquering enemy, lies something deeper than just the purely animal urge. The German people are a classic example of a race

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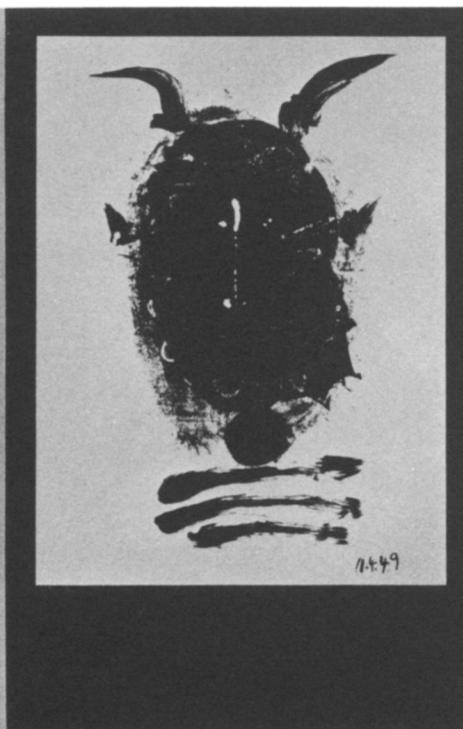
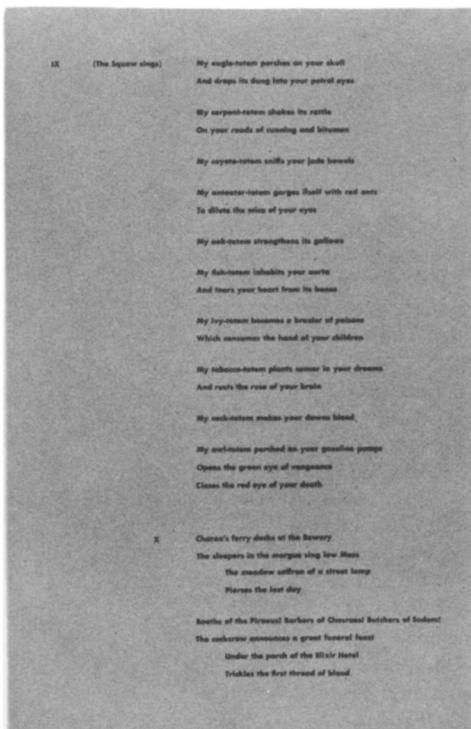
*Left: Binding of ART AND INDUSTRY by Herbert Read; designed by Marshall Lee. This reflects the fresh approach made possible by technical innovations. The printed photographic cover is protected by a laminated plastic sheet.*

*Far left: THE TABLES OF THE LAW by Thomas Mann; designed by Paul Rand. Although the binding shows the use of traditional gold stamping, its design has a timeless quality related to the book's theme.*



*Above: One of five division pages from BREAD IN THE WILDERNESS by Thomas Merton; designed by Alvin Lustig. An example of the use of photography to give a fresh visual and emotional sense to a traditional subject.*

*Left: ELEGY OF IHPETONGA by Yvan Goll, with four original Picasso lithographs; designed by Alvin Lustig. A contemporary example of the expensive, limited-edition book. Although printed on various-colored, hand-made papers, the type has been machine set. The page is defined by the long narrow columns of the poetry.*



of the living needs of these popular arts, they never hesitated to use all the technical and esthetic devices which would help them communicate more powerfully, and they have never been restricted by the sense of tradition that has hampered the book. And though the book has staunchly resisted attempts to sully it, the success of the "vulgar" arts in finding a vital link with the present has had a very direct and significant effect on the design of the book.

The elements that make up a traditional book and those that constitute a contemporary book are identical. The design of a book is an extremely subtle problem; as compared with the design of a magazine, it suggests rather the workings of a string quartet than those of a symphony orchestra. It involves a series of delicate relationships such as type selection, scale of type to the page, area of type on the page, width of margins, proportions of the book, choice of paper. These and similar nuances add up to a total that somehow must seem organically related to the material.

Not only are the elements of design the same in both the traditional and the contemporary book, but the factors that produce quality are identical in both instances. Wherein, then, lies the difference between them?

Perhaps the one factor that distinguishes the contemporary from the traditional designer is the willingness of the former to let the problem act upon him freely, without his having preconceived notions of the forms a solution should take. Of course, the traditional designer does this also, but within narrower limits. The traditionalist allows that certain type faces be used and others not; for him, the margin relationships are fixed, as are the proportions of the type page. In short, he accepts a whole series of inflexible rules that purport to carry on the wisdom of the past, slavishly following them in the firm conviction that by doing so he is maintaining the great tradition. Thus, one authority (who actually has made very important contributions to the art of the book) has issued such statements as these: "The typography of books . . . requires an obedience to convention which is almost absolute . . ." and "There is no reason for a title page to bear any line in a type larger than twice the size of the text letter . . . It [the title] should be set in

spaced capitals as a rule." Like all laws, some of these have a sound base and they must be understood before they are transgressed.

The attitudes towards the surface on which the artist works, the use of the multiple axis, the breaking of the classical frame, new concepts of space—all of the working vocabulary of the contemporary architect, designer, painter or sculptor—have made their way, slowly and painfully, into the art of book design. The modern book designer does not necessarily determine proportion according to the Golden Section, and if he wishes to explore Oriental conceptions of proportion, he feels free to do so. He does not feel that the bottom margins must always be the largest and the inner margins, the smallest; nor, on the word of some authority, does he accept the fact that some types are "illegible," when his experience has proved otherwise. He feels that there are no fixed rules about chapter openings, running heads or the treatment of folios—no rules, in short, such as those that limit the means of the traditional book designer.

For the contemporary designer, a whole new world of proportions has opened up in the past fifty years; he can change the basic size of the book which, in most cases today, is some dull variant of the Golden Section. He has at his disposal a whole scale and variety of type faces. Drawing, photography and color are elements that he now can use to help give the book its sense of visual richness, a sense that is rightly a part of its heritage.

But even apart from these means, the designer now can take advantage of technical advances—mechanical typesetters, photo engraving, high speed presses and hundreds of other developments that have no historical counterpart. Indeed, it is often simply the inability to accept these technological changes that distinguishes the "fine" printer-designer from the "commercial" printer. The former would be closer to upholding the great tradition he loves if, instead of lavishing care and a sense of quality on methods that have neither technical, economic nor esthetic validity, he were to adopt attitudes toward printing that are compatible with the machine and seek to develop in machine printing its own high standard of quality.

The early great printers thought it part of their nat-

ural role to design and cut their own type faces, manufacture their own ink and paper, design, compose and print their books, provide them with bindings and, in many cases, exercise a scholarship and display an erudition that made them publisher as well as printer. They were, besides, technical and esthetic innovators.

Today the industry is fragmented, and it would be difficult to find these talents combined in one organization, much less in one individual. Because of the high degree of specialization now, the role of the designer of books has become unclear; usually he has less direct contact with the technical aspects of production, and this means that he has less control of detail, which is such an integral part of quality.

In our time the designer functions in any one of several ways. The free-lance designer works with different publishers on a single-book basis. The designer

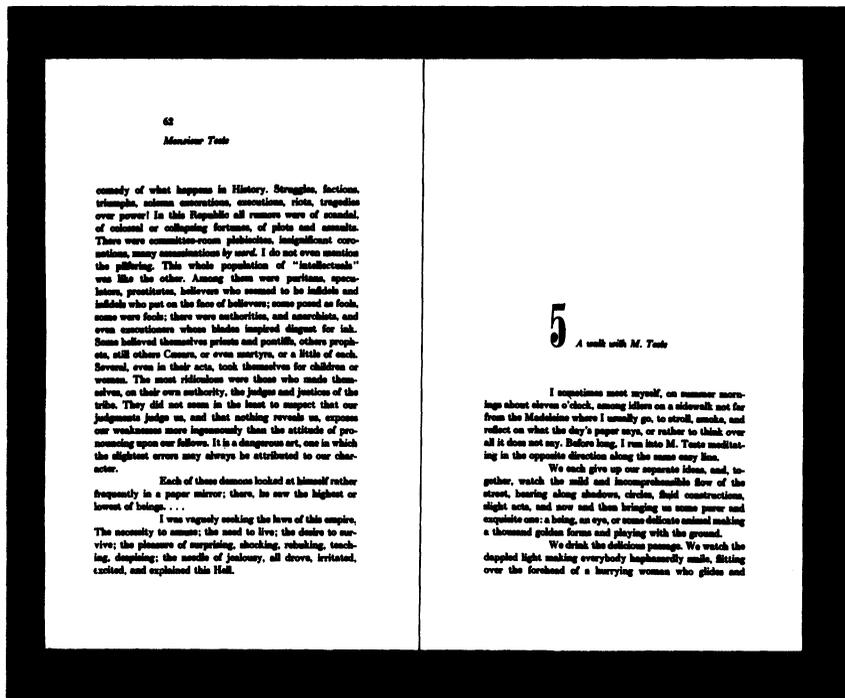
who is employed full-time by a publisher is generally required to work on a tremendous number of books a year, seldom being given time to do much more than a competent job. A number of free-lance designers service as many as three or four small publishing houses on a retainer basis, but because of the quantity of work that they do, they are usually little more than production control men.

A fairly recent phenomenon is the designer-employee of the big book printing plant. H. Wolff, Inc., of New York, perhaps pioneered in America, offering the small publisher, who can rarely afford a really good designer, the services of a highly trained professional, Marshall Lee, who is backed up by a production staff. Lee has ably demonstrated the high standards of quality and imagination that are possible in the design of the trade book when it is controlled by a good designer who is close to the means of production.

The designer for the university press usually works in a freer intellectual atmosphere and without the economic pressures that bear on the more commercial publishing houses—and these conditions naturally are reflected in the superior design of most university press books.

Finally, there is that vanishing craftsman, the designer-printer who, with an extremely small shop, still assumes the traditional role of being both designer and printer.

Today, when the very form of the book is being threatened, first by the tremendous competition it receives from other visual media and secondly by its own inherent economic weaknesses, the need for fresh and imaginative thinking is greater than ever. The steady dwindling of book sales and the inexorable rise of production costs are leading to an inevitable and imminent crisis. For all the mechanization of printing, the cost of the average mass-produced book is still out of proportion in physical value to thousands of objects that can be bought for the same amount of money. The paper-bound book is one attempt to cope with the problem. But perhaps the very form of the book needs to be redefined so that some less expensive and cumbersome method can be evolved to transmit man's verbal heritage.



MONSIEUR TESTE by Paul Valery; designed by Alvin Lustig. A chapter opening showing clear handling of subtle detail such as relation of running head, folio and indentation.