FOREWORD TO THE 2006 EDITION

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A publisher of scholarly books I once worked for would often complain that much of what passed as scholarship was too often no more than a "thin slice." *The New Typography* is a fairly thick slice, a seminal and controversial piece of twentieth-century graphic design history. It is appropriate that the University of California Press includes it in a series devoted to German cultural criticism because it is perhaps now more pertinent as a piece of design history than as a graphic design manual. Written in 1928 by a supremely self-assured young Jan Tschichold, it deals with two different kinds of design: typography for books and typography for publicity. Tschichold became best known for his work for publishers, so the reputation of *The New Typography* has become more closely associated with what he had to say about book design. His prescriptions for book typography now seem dated and eccentric (even he soon recanted many of them), but what he had to say about posters and letterheads still feels relevant for our time.

Thirty years after the publication of *The New Typography* the author admitted that "so many things in [the book] are erroneous, because my experience was too small."¹ However, even if the book has its flaws, it should not be dismissed (despite its dogmatic tone). As Ruari McLean wrote: "He was insisting on simplicity and purity in design, on the necessity of fitting design to modern printing methods, and of making design 'modern.'"²

All his working life Tschichold held strong, and not always consistent, theories about typography. His youthful polemic is written with enormous confidence and with all the passion of a born-again preacher. Though its subtitle, *A Handbook for Modern Designers*, suggests that the book is a practical guide, Tschichold's greater intent was to change attitudes, to convince designers to abandon what he considered were old-fashioned and no longer relevant ways of designing. It is not a how-to manual for novices.

Despite Tschichold's passionate manifesto, *Die neue Typografie* seems to have had little influence on German book publishing, especially after the rise of the Nazis who were far from enthusiastic about the sort of design he proposed. If Jan Tschichold had any influence on American book design, it was more probably through Penguin Books, where he worked for three years, than through *The New Typography*. Though the first English translation of *Die neue Typografie* by Ruari McLean was not published by the University of California Press until 1995, it is unlikely that most publishers

in this country at *any* time would have been sympathetic to Tschichold's youthful ideas. Tschichold seems to ignore that designers who might have attempted to apply his theories would almost certainly have found their work rejected by the publishers they worked for.

Designers are not free agents and must serve many masters, from author and editor to the marketing department and reader. It was all well and good that Tschichold found sans serif the right typeface for our time, but that did not mean that readers would agree. Tschichold was addressing designers for commercial publishers, but, ironically, the designers of private-press books are the ones most sympathetic to his ideas about typefaces, unusual orthography, and punctuation, since they are the only designers free to use type in whatever manner they feel appropriate.

Tschichold's thesis and his later refutation of it were not unknown, but until this edition in English appeared it was easy to dismiss the book as merely of historical interest. After all there was hardly anything "new" any more about the "new typography." How could a designer in the early twenty-first century relate, almost a century later, to the impact that Tschichold's proposals had? Design that was once revolutionary now appears dated, but if one looks beyond the form the messenger takes (i.e., Tschichold's design) and into his message, what he proposed in 1928 is not so very different in many ways from the "rules" he prescribed for Penguin Books in 1947.

This book is still relevant not for its dogmatic attacks on serif type and symmetric design but because of Tschichold's primary concerns that design should serve the text and reflect our time. To Tschichold in 1928 it seemed that the only way to realize those goals was by use of "undecorated" typefaces and asymmetry.

At that time Tschichold felt that designers relied too much upon "old" forms, such as the use of typefaces that were too decorative (any serif typeface), rules, and ornaments: "It is so easy to employ ornament to cover up bad design!"³ He was unhappy with almost all typefaces available to him, but he felt that sans serif was the only typeface "in spiritual accordance with our time." He wrote, "We must look for a typeface expressive of our own age."⁴ He rejected the idea of allusiveness—that is, of using the design of a particular typeface to express something about the content of the text. Sans serif, he thought, was neutral. Serif faces had "romantic associations" that "diverted the reader's attention" and belonged to the past. "The best typefaces are those that can be used for all purposes,"⁵ one of the reasons he considered only sans serif as appropriate.

It did not take him long to abandon his affection for sans serif. By the mid-1930s he had begun using serif and script fonts. He came to acknowledge

that serif type was best for books. He wrote that anything that made reading difficult "alienates us" and that "a typeface is the more legible the less its basic form differs from what has been used for many generations. . . . [T]he best typefaces are either classical fonts themselves . . . or new typefaces not drastically different from classical patterns."⁶ So much did Tschichold believe this that when in the 1960s he designed Sabon, one of the most successful typefaces for books, it was based on a classical roman typeface from the sixteenth century.

Aside from its historical interest *The New Typography* raises questions designers still must consider: Is there a typeface of "our" time? Is allusiveness valid? Must design be neutral? How do readers respond to sans serif in book texts? Even if we no longer accept Tschichold's answers, the issues are still valid. His "new typography" was a call to make design communicate as clearly and easily as possible. "The essence of the New Typography is clarity."⁷ He thought designers had to abandon their "personal vanity" to achieve "pure design." By this he meant that designers were too often making the text fit the design rather than constructing the design to fit the text.

Tschichold was concerned about how people read. It was not just the choice of typeface that was important, it was how the type was arranged. Text matter should be designed so that "the eye is led from one word and one group of words to the next."⁸

Tschichold's intention was to make reading as effortless as possible, but there are now some designers who feel quite the opposite. Rather than trying to make typography easier to read, they aim to slow readers down, to make them consider every word of the text, to work for the content. The "new typography" of our age is the opposite of Tschichold's, and he would have had little sympathy for this view at any time in his career.

In 1928 Tschichold wrote, "New needs and new contents create new forms which look utterly unlike the old. And it is just as impossible to argue away these new needs as it is to deny the need for a truly contemporary style of typography."⁹ Tschichold eventually changed his mind completely. He later wrote that it was a mistake to ignore the visual tradition of the book. There was no need to change it fundamentally because "there are some things that have long since reached perfection in form. . . . The book . . . completed its development long ago."¹⁰

Tschichold's idea of "newness" grew out of his disagreement with designers who relied upon old conventions. His intention was to help readers, though many of them might not have found his "improvements" particularly helpful. Beyond Tschichold's failure to acknowledge that readers did (and

perhaps still do) prefer serif type to sans serif, most readers would probably find his abandonment of the practice of indenting paragraphs an equally disturbing affectation. Even he came to realize not long after the publication of *The New Typography* that with an intelligent understanding and application of the "old" conventions of book design, classical typography could achieve his indispensable goal of clarity and appropriateness. Instead of wholesale abandonment of the traditions of book design, he came to advocate a reevaluation of those forms. In a 1964 lecture he said, "We have to return to the great traditions of the Renaissance and the Baroque book, study the originals and fill them with new life."¹¹

The New Typography did not fully address what Tschichold would have done with historic texts. How might the young Tschichold have designed the Bible? Other than the design of the book itself, none of Tschichold's illustrations in *The New Typography* show us his thoughts about how other books should be designed. The visual examples are instead publicity materials (letterheads, posters, and advertisements). These seem far more reasonable to us today than does the design of *Die neue Typografie*.

After Tschichold had revised his thinking and abandoned the dogma of *Die neue Typografie*, the designer Max Bill criticized him for his apostasy. In 1946 Tschichold defended himself by pointing out that though he had changed his mind about typefaces (i.e., serif types were acceptable) and recognized that the requirements of book design were different from those of the design for publicity, he continued to believe in many principles of the new typography. These were:

1. Fewest possible type-faces.
2. Fewest possible type sizes.
3. No letter-spacing of lower-case. . . .
4. Emphasis by using italic or bold of the same face.
5. Use capitals only as an exception, then always carefully letter-spaced.
6. Form groups—not more than three.¹²

These principles are not so very different from Tschichold's *Penguin Composition Rules* of 1947, specifications for the typesetting of books that would seem to be quite opposed to the kinds of design he championed in 1928. The difference was that the way he applied these rules in 1928 was far different from the way he came to as early as the 1930s.

In *Die neue Typografie* Tschichold argued for typography that served the text and noted that the purpose of design should not be to create art. In 1948 Tschichold wrote, "In a masterpiece of typography, the artist's signature has been eliminated. . . . Personal typography is defective typography. Only beginners and fools will insist on using it."¹³

If we (and he) no longer accept that the purity of design could be served only by using sans serif type and abandoning symmetry and ornamentation, what can a book designer learn today from *The New Typography*? Most importantly, that design and typography should develop from the author's words: "Every part of the text relates to every other part by a definite, logical relationship of emphasis and value. . . . It is up to the typographer to express this relationship clearly and visibly through type sizes and weight."¹⁴

It would be interesting to speculate how the postwar Tschichold might have designed *Die neue Typografie* assuming he could have been convinced to take on the project. This is not necessarily an unlikely assignment. The designer of this translation, Steve Renick, sought to be faithful to Tschichold's original. But, would Tschichold have done the same given his later devotion to symmetry and serif type?

Book designers must still address the same core issue that Tschichold raised: how best to serve the text.

Complete neutrality in successful book design is rare. The sort of bland symmetry that Tschichold disliked is acceptable even today to many publishers. Perhaps these "nondesigned" books of the twenty-first century are better than the ones that Tschichold complained of, but there is no excuse not to do better. We now have at hand typefaces from every era and certainly better sans serifs than were available to Tschichold in 1928. Finding the right typeface for the text and our time is what Tschichold was writing about. Like him, though, today's designers need to be aware of the tradition and conventions of book typography. He was right to argue against the vanity of designers who put their own ideas ahead of the author's.

The New Typography still has much to say to us, even if it is no longer so new.

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1. Ruari McLean, *Jan Tschichold: Typographer* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1975), 156.

2. *Ibid.*, 38.

3. Page 69 of this volume.

4. *Ibid.*, 78.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Jan Tschichold, *The Form of the Book*, trans. Hajo Hadeler (1948; reprint, Vancouver: Hartley and Marks, 1991), 13.

7. Page 66 of this volume.

8. Ibid., 70.
9. Page 14 of this volume.
10. McLean, *Jan Tschichold*, 139.
11. Tschichold, *Form of the Book*, 31.
12. McLean, *Jan Tschichold*, 139.
13. Tschichold, *Form of the Book*, 4.
14. Page 67 of this volume.