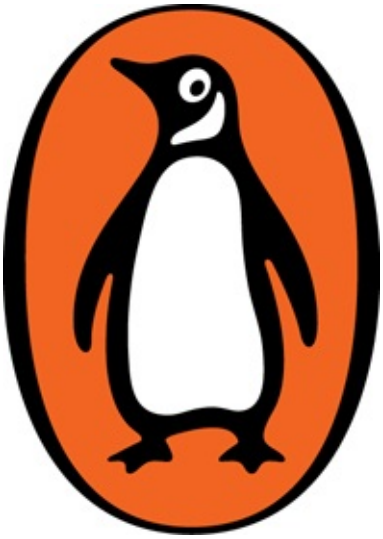
ERIC GILL

An essay on TYPOGRAPHY

'Written with clarity humility and a touch of humour . . . timeless and absorbing'
PAUL RAND, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*



Eric Gill

an essay on typography

Contents

The Theme

¶ The theme of this book is Typography, and Typography as it is affected by the conditions of the yea 1931. The conflict between industrialism & the ancient methods of handicraftsmen which resulted in the muddle of the 19th century is now coming to its term.
¶ But tho' industrialism has now won an almost complete victory, the handicrafts are not killed, & they cannot be quite killed because they meet an inherent, indestructible, permanent need in human nature. (Even if a man's whole day be spent as a servant of an industrial concern, in his spare time he will make something, if only a window box flower garden.)
¶ The two worlds can see one another distinctly and without recrimination, both recognising what is good in the other—the power of industrialism, the humanity of craftsmanship. No longer is there any excuse for confusion of aim, inconsistency of methods or hybridism in production; each world can leave the other free in its own sphere.
¶ Whether or no industrialism has 'come to stay' is not our affair, but certainly craftsmanship will be always with us — like the poor. And the two worlds are now absolutely distinct. The imitation 'perio work' and the imitation handicrafts merchants alone are certainly doomed. Handicrafts standards are as absurd for mechanised industry as machine standards are absurd for the craftsman.
¶ The application of these principles to the making of letters and the making of books is the special business of this book.

¶ This book was written in 1930, and now that a second and cheaper edition is called for it seems desirable to re-write a great part of it. It was one of the author's chief objects to describe two worlds — that of industrialism and that of the human workman — & to define their limits. It is one of the book's chief faults that that object was but imperfectly remembered. It has not been possible to correct this, but the book has been amended in many small particulars and a chapter added.
¶ Six years is a considerable time in human life, and if it be true that the witty remarks one makes at dinner party seem peculiarly foolish the next morning, how much more does the enthusiasm of 1930 appear foolish in 1936. The two worlds are still with us; the industrial world continuing in its diabolical direction, the humane world indestructible by its very nature. But the divorce between ther is even more complete, and the sphere of the handicraftsman even more curtailed.
¶ The determination to have all necessary things made by machinery, & to organise machine industry in such a way as to have only a few hour's work per day is now much more clearly defined than it wa even six years ago. And printing is one of the obviously necessary things, & to do it in any other way than by machinery appears more and more absurd. Thus one after the other the crafts, which were formerly the workman's means to culture, are being mechanised more or less completely, & now onl

such things as musical composition & painting pictures & giving lectures on the wireless, demand th actual responsible skill of the human being who does them. All other workmen are released from any other considerations but economic ones. It was possible to say these things six years ago; but to-day many more people are conscious of their truth. The newspapers are full of evidences that people are beginning to see the issue clearly. The widespread propaganda of financial reform is alone evidence o a great change in people's minds. They see now very clearly that the old man of the sea is a financial rather than a social tyrant.

¶ The industrial world may be wrecked by its bad finance and the wars which bad finance foments, or as seems less likely, a brave new world of logically organised machine production may be achieved. In either case human communications will continue, printing will still be called for, & much in this book may still be useful.

1. Composition of Time and Place

¶ Time & place must be taken into consideration in the discussion of any human affair, and this is particularly true in an abnormal time like the 20th century. It is not our business to write at length of this abnormality, but it is necessary at least to describe it, though, as is very often the case, it is more easy to say what it is not than what it is. It is not simply that abnormality which is caused by an exces of riches among the few and the poverty of the many; such an excess on either side does not necessarily destroy or disturb the essential humanity of our life. Nor is it the case of a free minority a against an enslaved or servile majority. Such a state may be ethically good or bad, but neither the fre nor the slaves are necessarily condemned to a life contrary to nature. The abnormality of our time, th which makes it contrary to nature, is its deliberate and stated determination to make the working life of men & the product of their working hours mechanically perfect, and to relegate all the humanities all that is of its nature humane, to their spare time, to the time when they are not at work.

¶ The full force of this abnormality is not apparent to the majority; perhaps no more than ten people i England see it. This state of affairs, though now deliberately fostered and definitely stated in many places, has been very gradually arrived at — it is only recently that it has arrived at any sort of completeness; but it is now almost complete and has come to be regarded as in no way contrary to nature and actually to be a normal state of affairs.

¶ This is not the place to demonstrate the steps by which the world has come to such views & to such condition, nor to discuss the ethical causes and consequences. It is sufficient for our purpose to describe the world of England in 1931, & it is necessary to do that in order that we may see what kind of world it is in which the thing called Typography now exists.

¶ We are concerned with Typography in England; it may be that the conditions are much the same in France, Germany and America, but we have no means of being certain of this. Moreover there are differences of language and even of lettering which make it necessary to restrict the circle in order to avoid confusion. ¶ What sort of a place, then, is England? It should now be possible to describe England pretty clearly; the transition from a pre-industrial, agricultural state is now mentally and practically complete; the thing can now be seen sharply defined against the background of her past. There are still all sorts of survivals, and even vigorous survivals, many of which are of their nature permanent and indestructible, but they are to be seen now as survivals and relics and not as integral parts of the world we have made. They are not of the soul of the existing structure, they are bodily survivals determined by another soul.

¶ The small shopkeeper, for instance, is still with us, and though the time has almost come wherein h will have no apparent place, nevertheless his survival is permanent; for nothing can stop small boys from selling one another marbles, and it is that personal dealing which is the root of all trading. ¶

Even the small craftsman, in spite of the impossibility of competition with ‘big business’ and mass-production, cannot be permanently put out of action, if only because the pen-knife is always with us and men will always want to make things to please themselves, tho’ only in their spare time.
¶ Nothing will stop men singing or making songs, even though music ‘on tap’ supply the bulk of the demand. ¶ And, most important of all, religion, which in spite of its establishment has now no effect in politics, cannot be destroyed. Even tho’ every institutional religion be banished from the state, every man will make a religion for himself, for no man can avoid some attempt at an answer to the question ‘What’s it all blooming well for?’.
¶ Nevertheless, in spite of their indestructibility, these things and others are now to be seen simply as survivals from our pre-industrial past; for industrialism is of its nature inimical to all of them, & it is industrialism that is the body of our modern world. As to its soul we are not immediately concerned; our business is to describe England in that aspect of it which concerns us as producers, makers of things. The spiritual and political description is outside our competence. Mr Maritain, in his recent essay on Religion and Culture, says: ‘The modern world is spiritually dominated by the humanism of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Cartesian Reform’. And though this be the exact truth its demonstration is here no affair of ours. ¶ Such demonstration, however, is quite unnecessary for there are now few who would wish to deny it. Leaders of shop-keepers, like Mr Selfridge, or of manufacture like Messrs Robinson and Cleaver of Belfast (who in their catalogues state that they are able to supply ‘Best blankets at 80s per pair, blankets ‘for the spare room’ at 65s, blankets ‘for servants’ bedrooms’ at 25s, and blankets ‘for charitable purposes’ at 18s — or some such scale of figures), leaders of finance like Lord Melchett, or of politics like the first Earl of Birkenhead, would all heartily agree that such are the spiritual dominations of the modern world. Here, therefore, we are concerned merely with description and not at all with either history or proofs. Almost for the first time we find ourselves able to say things with which nearly everyone will agree.
¶ We ask then again: What sort of a place is modern England? As we have said, Religion counts, the Churches are powerful forces; Nationality counts, the War could not have been fought had not the various peoples been moved by notions of patriotism. Customs, habits, all count; the clothes we wear, the language we speak, our architecture, tho’ for the most part a jumble of all the styles on earth, all these things count, but as yet they are very little outwardly the product of that which is the essence of our world. ¶ The world is not yet clothed in garments which befit it; in architecture, furniture, clothes we are still using and wearing things which have no real relation to the spirit which moves our life. We are wearing and using them simply because we are accustomed to them. The intellectual excitement which moves individual designers does not affect the mass of people. The majority still think Gothic architecture to be appropriate to churches, tho’ Gothic architecture is simply a method of building appropriate to stone and is not really more Christian than Hindu. We still make tables and chairs, even when we make them by machinery, with the same ornamental turnings & cornices & so forth as when furniture-making was the job of a responsible handicraftsman. We still wear collars and ties, whether we be kings, clerks or furnace men, though there is no necessity for a collar or a tie in any of these trades. All this is merely intellectual sloth; nobody can be bothered to live according to reason; there is even a strong national feeling of distaste for any attempt to do so. Doubtless a distrust of human reason is reasonable, but few adventures are more honourable than an attempt to live by it.

¶ Now the chief and, though we betray our personal predilection by saying so, the most monstrous characteristic of our time is that the methods of manufacture which we employ and of which we are proud are such as make it impossible for the ordinary workman to be an artist, that is to say a responsible workman, a man responsible not merely for doing what he is told but responsible also for the intellectual quality of what his deeds effect. That the ordinary workman should or could be an artist, could be a man whom we could trust with any sort of responsibility for the work he does, or proud of anything but that kind of craftsmanship which means skill and attention as a machine operator (and that responsibility is a purely moral one) is an idea now widely held to be ridiculous; and the widespreadness of this opinion proves my point as well as I could wish. When I say no ordinary workman is an artist, no one will say I am lying; on the contrary, everyone will say: Of course not.

¶ Such is the state of affairs, and its consequences should be obvious. That they are not is the cause of the muddle in which manufacture is at present to be found. For in a world in which all workmen but a few survivals from pre-industrial times, a number so small as to be now quite negligible, are as irresponsible as hammers and chisels & tools of transport, it should be obvious that certain kinds of work which were the products proper to men for whom work was the natural expression of their intellectual convictions, needs & sympathies, as it was of those who bought it, are no longer either natural or desirable. If you are going to employ men to build a wall, and if those men are to be treated simply as tools, it is imbecility to make such a design for your wall as depends upon your having masons who are artists. The 19th century architects' practice of designing ornamental walls and drawing out full size on paper every detail of ornament is now at last seen to be ridiculous even by architects; it is now understood that ornament is a kind of exuberance and that you cannot be exuberant by proxy; nineteenth century attempts at so being are desolate, and a world which desires pleasure more than anything else finds itself surrounded by things that please no one but fools.

¶ It is now clearly understood that modern building must not rely upon ornament, it must rely simply upon grandeur, that is integrity and size. There are things which can be measured; with these alone can the modern architect, employing the modern workman, concern himself. Of beauty there need be no lack, for the beautiful is that which pleases being seen, and those things are pleasing when seen which are as nearly perfect as may be in their adaptation to function. Such is the beauty of bones, of beetles, of well-built railway arches, of factory chimneys (when they have the sense to leave out the ornamental frills at the top), of the new concrete bridge across the Rhine at Cologne, of plain brick walls. ¶ There is nothing specifically human about such things or in such beauty. They are not redolent of man's delight in himself or of his love of God. But that is neither here nor there. We have elected to order manufacture upon inhuman lines; why should we ask for humanity in the product? Whether the present system will or can endure is simply irrelevant to this essay. The manifold injustices and miseries which seem to be its accompaniment may or may not be inevitable, & in any case are not here our concern; the conditions under which things are made, the material conditions, the technical conditions, are alone relevant. We are simply concerned to discover what kind of things can be made under a system of manufacture which, whatever its ethical sanction or lack of sanction, is certainly the system we have, the system of which we are proud and the system few desire to alter.

¶ It is necessary to say a few more words about the word 'artist'. We affirm that the word Art means

skill, that a work of art is a work of skill, and an artist one who is skilful at making things. It would appear therefore that all things made are works of art, for skill is required in the making of anything. And in spite of industrialism this remains true. But, as we have said, the ordinary workman has been reduced to the level of a mere tool used by someone else. However much skill he may have in his fingers and conscientiousness in his mind, he can no longer be regarded as an artist, because his skill is not that of a man making things; he is simply a tool used by a designer and the designer is alone th artist. ¶ Another thing that must be made clear is that we are not at all oblivious of the real distinctio between what the ordinary person nowadays calls art, and the other things. Picture-painting, sculptur music, are indeed art par excellence, but that they alone are now called art is not because they alone are or can be art, but because they alone to-day are the work of men not only skilful, and not tools in the hands of another, but workmen responsible for the things they make.

¶ Even those higher flights of human skill, about which the critics make so much trouble, those paintings, sculptures, & compositions of music in which human emotion seems to play so large a par that it seems as though emotion were the substance of such works, even these are things demanding skill in their making, and we prefer to call them ‘Fine Art’ to distinguish them, rather than to deny th name of Art to things whose primary purpose is to supply merely physical conveniences.

¶ The ordinary workman, then, is not an artist; he is a tool in the hands of another. He is a morally sensitive tool, but now, in spite of the continued survival of the old fashioned workman (tho’ such survivals are necessarily becoming rarer in the ranks of ordinary workmen), he is not intellectually sensitive. It is clear, therefore, that no demand must be made upon him which calls for anything but good will. As in architecture it is now recognised that even plain masonry must be left from the saw — a chiselled surface has no longer any value — so in all other works & especially in those of factor production, wherein labour is subdivided as much as possible & the product standardised, everything in the nature of ornament must be omitted and nothing must be put in which is not strictly a logical necessity. Houses, clothes, furniture and all appliances and convenient gadgets must be so made; and this is not because we hate ornament & the ornamental, but because we can no longer procure such things; we have not got a system of manufacture which naturally produces them, and, most important of all, if we insist on the ornamental we are not making the best of our system of manufacture, we ar not getting the things which that system makes best. ¶ The process by which a railway locomotive ha become the beautiful thing it now is, by which the less ostentatious motor-cars have become objects delight to those who see them, by which plain spoons and forks achieve that quality of neatness whic gives nearly as much satisfaction as the best Queen Anne silver, this process must be welcomed in al other departments of manufacture. And if the human race is really convinced that it cannot forgo ornament and the ornamental it must, for the making of such things, have recourse to those workmen who remain outside the industrial system, painters, sculptors and poets of all kinds, in whatever material they work, whether words or wool, & be prepared to pay highly; for such things cannot be cheap when artists and poets are not ordinary workmen but highly intellectual and self-conscious people. And ornamental typography is to be avoided no less than ornamental architecture in an industrial civilisation.

¶ Let us take it for granted, then, that the ordinary workman is no longer an artist; and further that no operation is to be regarded as one for which the workman is intellectually responsible; such

intelligence as he has is to be directed solely to the well-doing of what he is told to do. We may leave it to the directors of industry to see to it that labour be properly subdivided & rationalised in accordance with the dictates of economy; we may leave it to politicians & moralists to see to it that the physical conditions of the workers are hygienic & morally justifiable. We, neither directors of labour nor politicians, are solely concerned with the kind & quality of the things made. It is no longe permissible to design things with no reference but to our own pleasure, leaving it to engineers to design machines capable of making them; our business is now to design things which are suitable for machines to make. And this is not to say that we accept the limitations of machines as they are to-da but that we accept the limitations of machinery as such. Moreover, and this is even more important, we are not saying that the machine is the arbiter in design: the mind is always that. The shape of A cannot be changed at the bidding of any machine that is or could be made. But, taking the shape of A to be that which the judgement of the mind lays down, we have to conform it to the nature of the machine, and not attempt to impose upon mechanical production either those ornamental exuberance which are natural and proper enough to human beings working with their hands or those peculiarities of detail which are proper to the pen, the chisel, and the graver.

¶ But while it is clear that the determining principle of an industrial world (what the theologians call its soul) is such as we have described — the perfection of mechanical manufacture, the obliteration o all intellectual responsibility in the workman, the relegation of all humane interests to nonworking hours & the consequent effort to reduce working hours to a minimum — it is equally clear that the outward appearance of our world shows at present very little of the principle which inspires it. The merest glance at the Fleet Street of 1931 shows how little we have yet put on the garb of an industrialism shorn of pre-industrial enthusiasms. We can still endure, tho' with an increasing sense of their ridiculousness, the imitation gothic Law Courts, the quasi-classical West End branch of the Bank of England and all the gimcrack stucco buildings of the nineteenth century. Even the new building of the news paper called The Daily Telegraph, for all its air of modernity, is only an architectural essay in stone stuck on the front of an iron framework; and the sculptures & ornaments which adorn it show how far we are yet from a complete expression of our belief in mechanical perfection and its functional beauty. It is certain, moreover, that we shall never achieve a complete expression; for, quite apart from our notorious readiness to compromise, the essential inhumanity of industrial methods acts as a tonic to the forces which oppose it. However nearly complete the victory of mechanised industry may be, it can never obliterate the fact of human responsibility, & there will always be many who will choose to be masters of their own work & in their own workshops rather than masters of other men working under sub-human conditions, that is to say conditions which deny them intellectual responsibility.

¶ There are, then, two worlds & these twain can never be one flesh. They are not complementary to one another; they are, in the liveliest sense of the words, mortal enemies. On the one hand is the worl of mechanised industry claiming to be able to give happiness to men and all the delights of human lif — provided we are content to have them in our spare time and do not demand such things in the work by which we earn our livings; a world regulated by the factory whistle and the mechanical time-keeper; a world wherein no man makes the whole of anything, wherein the product is standardised an the man simply a tool, a tooth on a wheel. On the other is the languishing but indestructible world of

the small shopkeeper, the small workshop, the studio and the consulting room — a world in which th notion of spare time hardly exists, for the thing is hardly known and very little desired; a world wherein the work is the life & love accompanies it. ¶ These two worlds are nowhere perfectly exemplified, but both worlds strive to perfect themselves. Nowhere is industrialism complete, but all industrialists and millions of their human tools have the ambition to complete it. Nowhere is there a perfectly humane civilisation, but all who are not enthralled by industrialism desire its perfection. On the one hand is the dream of those who imagine a perfectly organised system of mass production; every article of use made to a good standard pattern; a perfected system of marketing and transport, whether Communist or Capitalist; the hours of labour, both for masters & men, reduced to a few hou a day, & a long leisure time devoted to amusement & love-making, even to the pursuit of the thing which they call Art — it will be encouraged by the state, & doubtless prizes will be offered; moreove to sit on excellent steel furniture in an equally excellent operating-theatre house and do 'fret' work o modelling in clay or 'water colour painting' with mass-produced water colours will give much amusement to many. Then will be seen the truth of the saying that: Industrialism has released the artist from the necessity of making anything useful. On the other hand is the normal life of men, scarred, it is true, by every human weakness and malice, but securely founded upon the responsibility of workmen, whether artists or labourers. In such a world there is plenty of time but none to spare. There is less water colour painting but plenty of love-making. There are no modern conveniences but many babies. There would be no one to build the Forth Bridge but plenty to build houses; and the printing of books would be done slowly & painfully by hand. ¶ All these things are said in amity & n in bitterness. An industrialism which really completes itself will have many admirable and noble features. The architecture of our streets and homes will be plain, but it will not therefore be ugly. There is nothing ugly about an operating-theatre strictly designed for its purpose, and a house or flat designed on the same lines need be neither ugly nor uncomfortable. Cushions and colour are the chie ingredients in the recipe for comfort; and rationality, even though limited to a field which excludes a that is sacred, remains the chief ingredient in the recipe for the making of things of beauty. Moreove from the Pyramid of Cheops to the bare interior of Westminster Cathedral (before it was spoilt with marbles and mosaics) ornament has never been a necessity of noble architecture; and plain lettering, when properly chosen and rationally proportioned, has all the nobility of plain words.

¶ Nevertheless, this world, this industrialist world, will never complete itself or achieve its perfectio The good that it offers is a positive good, but it excludes too much. The soul of the ordinary man and woman is full of good will; but good sense, logical intelligence, is too rare. However logical, howeve beautiful plain things are or might be, they will not satisfy the appetites of normal men and women.

¶ Nor, on the other hand, will the humane world ever be perfected; the temptation to save time and money is too strong. Man's good will is undermined by laziness as well as stupidity; by his appetite for amusement no less than his love of power; by his aggressiveness no less than his acquisitiveness. He is thus an easy prey to the allurements of a scientifically organised industrialism which offers hin the whole world to play with and dopes him with the idea that in serving it he is serving his fellow-men.

¶ Therefore industrialism will compromise with the Humane, and the Humane will dally with industrialism. We shall have machine-made ornament (tho' in the near future there will mercifully b

less than in the immediate past) and we shall have motor-buses tearing along country roads. We shall have imitation handicrafts in London shops, & cows milked by machinery even on small farms, and we shall have cottage larders stocked with canned foods.

¶ Nevertheless, the positive good & the positive dignity of industrialism will undoubtedly achieve an almost complete ascendancy in men's minds to-morrow, and this ascendancy will purge even the Humane of its foibles. The two worlds will grow more distinct and will recognise each other without the present confusion. The hard and logical development of industrialism will impose, even upon its enemies, a very salutary hardness and logicality. Fancy lettering will be as distasteful to the artist as will be to the engineer — in fact it is more than probable that it will be the artists who will give the lead. It has always been so. It is not the artist who is sentimental — it is the men of business and the man of science. Even now there are very few really logical & relentless alphabets of plain letters in common commercial use in this country, and they were designed by artists. And even in that age, six hundred years ago, when the responsibility of workmen was most widely distributed, & builders, in the absence of mechanical appliances, & designers, in the absence of unlimited and cheap drawing paper, were dependent on the good sense as much as the good will of the workman, there was a restraint, a science, a logic, which modern architecture does not rival & which even modern engineering does not surpass. The parish church of S. Pierre at Chartres, for example, is the purest engineering; it is as free from sentimentalism & frivolity as any iron-girder bridge of to-day, but it is the engineering of men raised above themselves by a spiritual enthusiasm, whereas the best modern egineering is but the work of men sub-human in their irresponsibility and moved by no enthusiasm b that of material achievement.

¶ Nevertheless, as we have said, the restraint imposed on modern manufacture and building by mode industrial conditions imposes itself also on the work of those who stand outside industrialism. Artists no less than engineers are forced to question the very roots of workmanship, to discover the first wor the word that was at the beginning. And we can only pray that those who employ industrial methods manufacture will pursue those methods to a logical and stern conclusion — thus only can our age leave a monument worthy of its profane genius and mechanical triumph — and that those who refuse the blandishments of power or the ease of irresponsibility will discover that in its ultimate analysis t only justification for human work is an intrinsic sanctity.

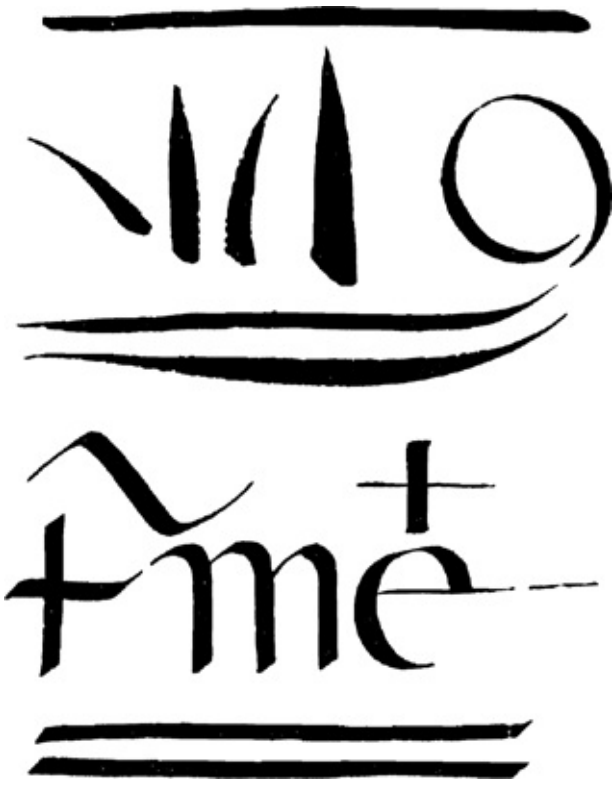
2. Lettering

¶ Letters are signs for sounds. Signs for numbers and other things (like the sign for a dollar) may in practice be included, though they are not strictly letters (except as in Roman or Greek numerals & th letter signs used in Algebra). ¶ Letters are not pictures or representations. Picture writing and hieroglyphics are not letters from our point of view; and tho' our letters, our signs for sounds, may b shown to be derived from picture writing, such derivation is so much of the dim and distant past as to concern us no longer. ¶ Letters are not pictures or representations. They are more or less abstract forms. Hence their special and peculiar attraction for the 'mystical mug called man. Mpre than most things, letters allow him to consider beauty without fear of what the Home Secretary may think or do Art and morals are inextricably mixed, but the art of lettering is freer from adulteration than most arts; hence among a highly cultured & rational people like the Chinese the high place of calligraphy and inscription. Among the Chinese, good writing is more highly honoured than painting is with us, a highly perhaps as we honour a successful contraption for boiling soap.

¶ It is a matter of satisfaction, therefore, that, in spite of our preoccupation with merely physical convenience, we have inherited an alphabet of such pre-eminent rationality and dignity as the Roman A good example is the inscription on Trajan's Column at Rome, of which a plaster cast is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. ¶ Lettering is for us the Roman alphabet and the Roman alphabe is lettering. Whatever the Greeks or the Germans or the Russians or the Czecho-Slovaks or other people may do, the English language is done in Roman letters, and these letters may be said to have reached a permanent type about the first century A. D. ¶ Though in the course of the centuries innumerable variations in detail have been made, Roman letters have not changed essentially. Fourteen hundred years after the cutting of the Trajan inscription the tablet in Henry VII's chapel wa inscribed, and no Roman would have found any difficulty in reading the letters. Eighteen hundred years after the time of Trajan & four hundred years after Henry VII, Roman letters are still made, and in almost the same way (e. g. the Artillery Monument, Hyde Park Corner).

¶ But, although the Roman alphabet has remained essentially unchanged through the centuries, customs & habits of work have changed a great deal. In the time of the Romans, say A. D. 100, when man said the word 'letters' it is probable that he immediately thought of the kind of letters he was accustomed to seeing on public inscriptions. Altho' all sorts of other kinds of lettering existed (on wa tablets, on papyrus, &c.) the most common kind of formal lettering was the inscription in stone. The consequence was that when he made letters 'as well as he could' it was the stone inscription letter tha he took as his model. He did not say: Such & such a tool or material naturally makes or lends itself to the making of such and such forms. On the contrary, he said: Letters are such and such forms; therefore, whatever tools & materials we have to use, we must make these forms as well as the tools

and materials have had a very great influence on letter forms. But that influence has been secondary, and for the most part it has been exerted without the craftsman's conscious intention.

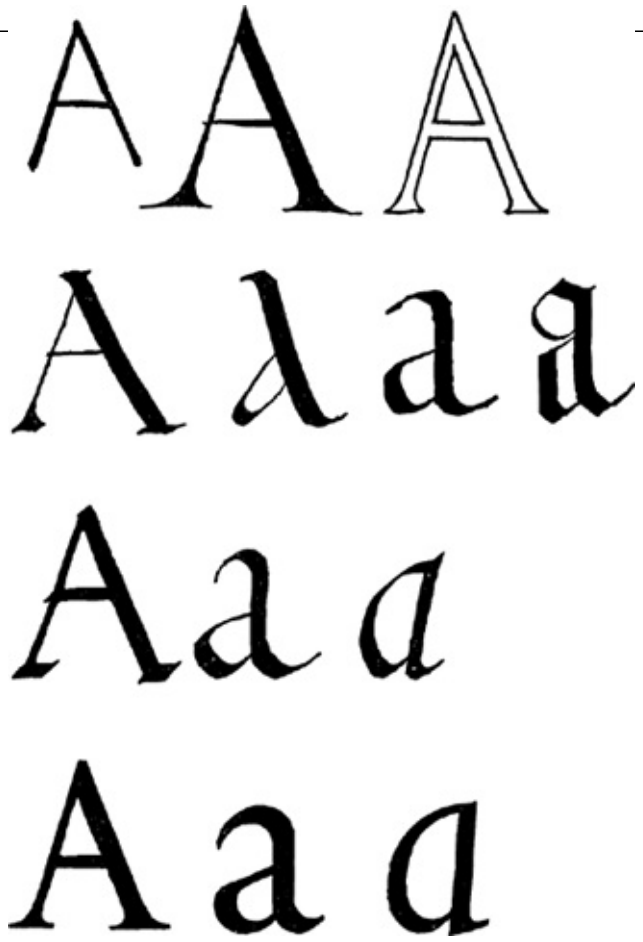


(Figure 1 shows brush strokes and pen strokes. An ordinary pointed brush held vertically to the paper will of its nature make th strokes shown in the upper part of the figure. The lower part shows the strokes naturally produced by a broad pen, that is thick strokes, thin strokes, and gradations from thick to thin. The engraving is facsimile, & is given to show not good forms or bad, goo letters or bad, but simply the forms characteristic of the brush and pen.)

¶ If we admit, as it seems we must admit, that in Roman times the public inscription in stone was the chief model for all forms of letters, we shall expect to find that when they began to make lettering with a pen, on paper or skin, the forms of letters would be imitations of inscription forms; and this is precisely what we do find. A good example is the Vergil in the library of St. Gall, Switzerland. A facsimile may be seen in the Palæographical Society's Publications, Series 1, vol. 2, Pl. 208.

¶ Pen writing, even as late as the fourth century, shows very clearly that the scribe had no idea of inventing 'pen' forms of letters, but was simply making as well as he could with a pen what he conceived to be ordinary lettering. Whether he held the pen one way or the other (so that the thick strokes came vertically or horizontally) makes no difference to the primary intention of the scribe. H was not inventing letters; he was writing forms already invented.

¶ But the influence of the tool employed was very great (see figure 1), & in the course of time, owing to the greatly increased use of writings and the relative decrease in inscriptions, and owing to the increase of speed in writing and the prevalence of hastily scribbled writing, people became familiar with forms of letters which, tho' meant to be ordinary Roman letters, were considerably different.



(Figure 2, reading in the customary order, shows (1) the essential form of A; (2) the same with the customary thick and thin strok and serifs as made with a brush; (3) the same as incised with a chisel; (4) the same made with a broad pen, three strokes; (4-7) the two-stroke A, as developed between the fourth and fifteenth centuries; (8-10) sixteenth century writing; (11-13) modern forms of th same, suitable for type.)

¶ Thus in the letter A (see figure 2), to make three separate strokes of the pen was too much for a ma in a hurry, & two-stroke A's became familiar.

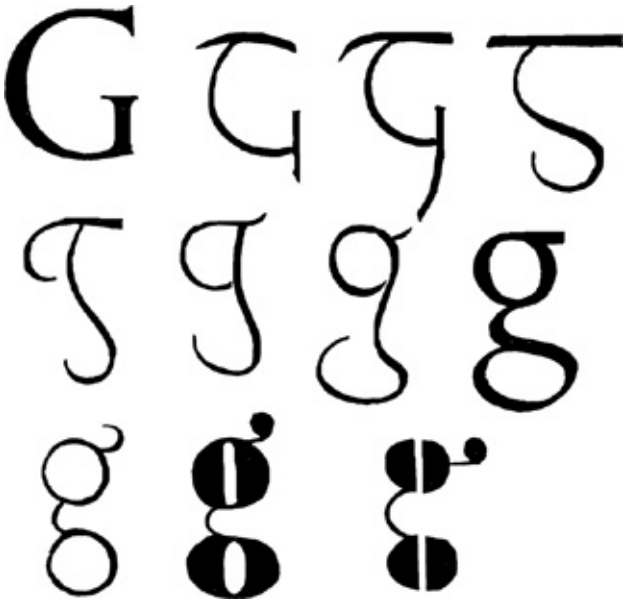
By the seventh century this form was well established, and was as much recognisable as A as the original three-stroke Roman form. ¶ In the same way, the form of serif which was easy to make in stone (which is, in fact, the natural way to finish an incised line neatly) was less natural & less easy with a pen. Penmen took naturally to leaving them out whenever their presence seemed unnecessary.

¶ The influence of the tool is perhaps less obvious in stone inscriptions. Inscription cutting is a slow job anyway. But certain forms are more difficult to cut than others, e. g. a thick line meeting another at an angle, as in the K. The letter-cutter naturally avoids such things. ¶ Again, take the letter G. The evolution of our modern small g is seen to be chiefly due to the prevalence of & consequent familiarity with hastily scribbled forms (see fig. 3). Nevertheless, in no case does the scribe imagine he is inventing a new form; he is only concerned to make well or ill the form with which he is familiar.

¶ By the sixth century a form of writing obviously more natural to penmanship (see British Museum Harl. MS. 1755) had been evolved. And the process continued until all resemblance to the Roman original was hidden (see B. M. Add. MS. 24585).

¶ I am not concerned to describe in detail the history of the process in its technical and economic significance. The point that chiefly concerns me is that, with whatever tools or materials or economic

circumstance (that is hurry & expense), the artist, the letter-maker, has always thought of himself as making existing forms, & not inventing new ones. Thus, the Lombards of the fourteenth century did not sit down and invent Lombardic lettering. The Siennese inscription in the Victoria and Albert Museum, dated 1309, is simply a stone version of the pen letters with which the letter-cutter was familiar. The letter-cutters of the fifteenth century did not invent ‘gothic. They had the job of cutting stone inscriptions, and they did it in the ordinary letters of their time. The forms of their letters were what we call ‘pen forms. But they cared nothing about that. To them they were simply letters. And ju as we saw that in Roman times the Roman scribe imitated the stone inscription forms because, for him, nothing else was letters; so, in the fifteenth century, when the written was the most common and influential form of lettering, the position is reversed, & the letter-cutter copies the scribe — the stone inscription is imitation pen-writing (with such inevitable small modifications as, in stone, cannot be avoided), whereas in the fourth century the written book was an imitation of the stone inscription (with such small modifications as the pen makes inevitable).



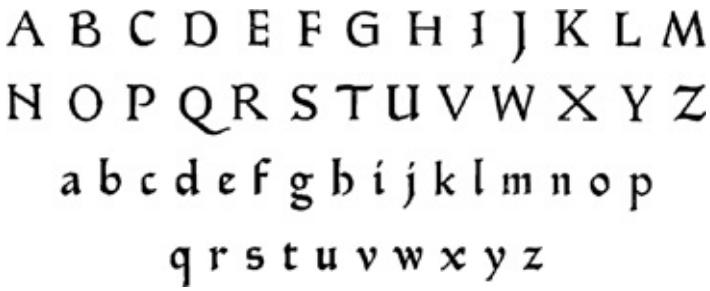
(Figure 3 (1-8) shows the evolution of the lower-case g from the Roman original. 9-11 are comic modern varieties having more relation to pairs of spectacles than to lettering — as though the designer had said: A pair of spectacles is rather like a g; I will make g rather like a pair of spectacles.)

¶ Apart from technical and economic influences the matter is complicated by the differences of individual temperaments and mentalities. Moreover, the physical and spiritual ferment which closed the fifteenth century was accompanied by a revival of interest in and enthusiasm for the things of ancient Greece and Rome, and for the earlier rounder and more legible writing of the ninth & tenth centuries. Nevertheless the first printers were no more the inventors of new letter forms than any oth craftsmen had been. The first printed books were simply typographic imitations of pen writing, just a were fifteenth century inscriptions in stone (see fig. 4).

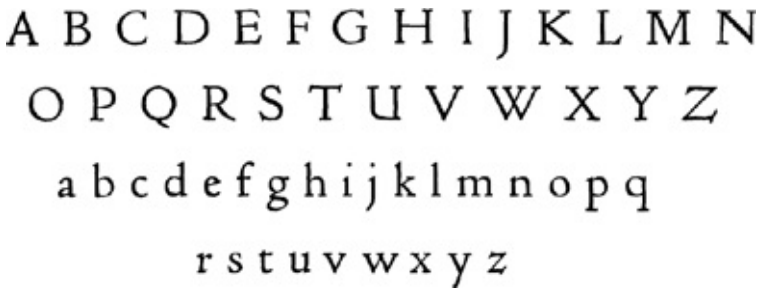
¶ Letters are letters — A is A and B is B — and what we call a gothic A was for Pynson simply A. Printing started in northern Europe, where the gothic forms were the norm. But the centre of culture was not in the North. German printers moved to the South. The influence of Italian letter forms may be seen in the ‘semi-gothic’ or ‘semi-humanistic’ type of Sweynheim and Pannartz (see figure 5). Except in Germany, the gothic forms of letters were generally abandoned. The Italian printers set

about the designing of typographic forms of the round, open Italian penmanship (see figure 6). Again they did not invent new forms, but formalised and adapted existing forms to the exigencies of typefounding and printing.

(Figure 4: Caslon's Black Letter. This type, like that of Gutenberg, Caxton, &c., was cut in imitation of fifteenth century northern European handwriting. But though the original was handwriting it was for the first printers simply lettering — the only lettering with which they were familiar, book-lettering.)



(Figure 5: the Subiaco type. This modern version, cut for the Ashendene Press, London, of the type of Sweynheim and Pannartz 1465, shows the change in style caused by Italian influence.)



(Figure 6: Jenson's type. This modern version, cut for the Cranach Press, Weimar, of the type of Nicolas Jenson, c. 1490, shows the emancipation achieved both from the gothic of northern Europe and from handwriting generally. Henceforth the designing of type was primarily the work of punch-cutters, that is of engravers. Letters were still reminiscent but no longer an imitation of handwriting.)

¶ The main work having been done by the early Italian printers, the succeeding centuries saw no great changes in the forms of Roman type letters. Such changes as occurred were no longer due to the influence of hand-driven tools like the chisel or the pen, but were due to the varieties of national temper & commerce. For instance, it is said that there is something peculiarly English about Caslon's type (figure 7); and, though there is nothing peculiarly Italian about Bodoni's type (fig. 8), it is clear that by calling it the first of the modern type faces we are noting the change of character which we associate with the word 'modernity'. Type faces like Caslon's, Baskerville's (fig. 9) or Miller & Richard's Old Style (figure 10) were not assertive enough for nineteenth century commercial printing. The heaviness, i.e. the absence of much contrast in thick and thin, of type faces like Jenson's or Aldus's make them illegible for hurried reading. The needs of commerce & especially of newspaper

printers gave a great impetus to the ‘modern’ type faces. ‘Modern face’ became the ordinary face, an everything conformed to it. The nineteenth century letter-cutter, as may be seen by nineteenth centur tombstones, did his best to do ‘modern face’ in stone. Engravers & even the writers of illuminated addresses did the same.

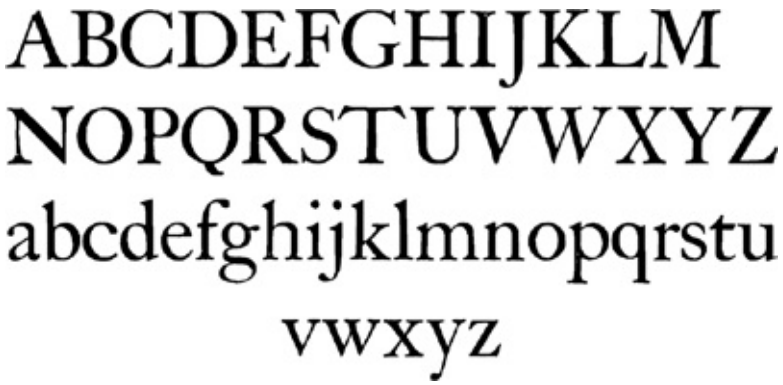


Figure 7: Caslon’s Old Face, 1734

Figure 8: ‘Monotype’ Bodoni

¶ The twentieth century is witnessing a reaction. It is a multifold reaction, partly intellectual, partly moral, partly anti-commercial, though commerce is not behind itself in its effort to extract profit eve from anti-commercialism. The nineteenth century developed machinery, & machine-makers are now able to supply accurate, though mechanical, imitations of the type faces of the pre-commercial era. Letters are letters, whether made by hand or by machine. It is, however, desirable that modern machinery should be employed to make letters whose virtue is compatible with their mechanical manufacture, rather than exact and scholarly resuscitations of letters whose virtue is bound up with their derivation from humane craftsmanship.

Figure 9: ‘Monotype’ Baskerville

Figure 10: Miller & Richard’s Old Style

¶ While the main stream of lettering has run in typographic channels for the last four hundred years, there has, of course, continued the need of lettering in many other things than books and newspapers. Even handwriting has maintained its existence, & the style of letter called italic still preserves its ‘cursive’ character. Most italic type faces, however, (see figure 11, 5) are too sloping and too cursive There is a great need of a narrow and less sloping letter, which, while giving emphasis and difference shall be of the same noncursive character as the upright letters they are used with. Both the Perpetua (fig. 11, 3) and the Joanna italics (figure 11, 4) are so designed, and the latter having only a very slig slope is used with the upright capitals. The Joanna ‘italic’ was designed primarily to be used by itself i. e. as a book face and not simply as a letter to be used for emphasis.

¶ The same excessively cursive quality as afflicts Italic has always afflicted Greek types (fig. 11, 7). For some reason or other, probably the comparative rareness of Greek printing, the leaders of typographic design in the fifteenth century never achieved for Greek what they did for Latin & modern languages. That the thing is possible is shown by what the Emperor Peter the Great did in the case of Russian writing. The Russian alphabet is closely related to the Greek. The formalisation of Russian script was achieved very successfully by the Dutch typographers employed by Peter the Great; & the same thing could be done for Greek. ¶ Many varieties of Greek types exist, but for the most part they are more italic than the Italics. In recent years attempts have been made at improvement, but no attempt has been made to take advantage of the fact that Greek capitals have always been made in the same way as Roman capitals. Instead of keeping the capitals as they are and designing a lower-case to match, reformers have always proceeded in the opposite way and altered th capitals to match an improved and less cursive lower-case. The Perpetua Greek (fig. 11, 8 and 9) is th

first example of an attempt to do for Greek what Peter the Great did for Russian and Jenson and other did for Latin. Just as the capitals of the Perpetua Greek are of precisely the same family as Perpetua Roman, so the Perpetua Greek lower-case is of the same family as the Perpetua Roman lower-case. The letter & serif formation is uniform throughout.

(Figure 11: 1 and 2, Perpetua Roman capitals and lower-case; 3, Perpetua italic; 4, Joanna italic; 5 Caslon Old Face italic; 6 & 7 Porson Greek capitals & lower-case; 8 & 9, Perpetua Greek capitals and lower-case.)

¶ Letters are letters. A is A, and B is B. The letter-maker of the twentieth century has not got to be an inventor of letter forms but simply a man of intelligence & good will. ¶ Whether in stone, wood, pain or metal

> The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
> Is — not to fancy what were fair in life
> Provided it could be — but, finding first
> What may be, then find how to make it fair

& the word fair can be taken in both senses — it means both beautiful and just.

¶ As the Roman, when he thought of lettering, thought of inscription letters; as the medieval man thought of written letters; so in the twentieth century, when we write a letter carefully we call it 'printing'. The printed letter is lettering for us.

¶ But there are many forms of printed letter which do not seem entirely satisfactory. One of the commonest forms of unsatisfactoriness is due to the unnecessary and therefore unreasonable mixing of many different sorts of letters on the same page or in the same book. It is a safe rule not to mix different styles of letters on the same page, or different faces of type in the same book. A book printe in an inferior type will be better if that inferior type be strictly kept to than if other and even better types be mixed in with it.

¶ The business of poster letters (see figure 12) has not yet been extricated from the degradations imposed upon it by an insubordinate commercialism. Mere weight and heaviness of letter ceases to b effective in assisting the comprehension of the reader when every poster plays the same shouting game. A man at whom twenty brick manufacturers throw bricks from every side at once is quite unable to distinguish the qualities in which 'Blue Staffordshires' are superior to 'London Stocks' A return to mere legibility (see fig. 13) seems desirable even if the effect be less striking. To this end it is necessary to study the principles of legibility — the characters which distinguish one letter from another, the proportions of light and dark in letters and spacing.

(Figure 12 is a reduced copy of a ‘John Bull’ poster. It shows how the desire to arrest attention by making the letters as black as possible defeats the object of the poster, i. e. quick legibility. For from a very short distance the letters are indistinguishable.)

(Figure 13 shows a poster letter designed to give the maximum blackness compatible with quick legibility and a rational differentiation between the letters, e. g. the D &. O.)

¶ A square or oblong with its corners rounded off may, by itself, be more like an O (see fig. 14) than anything else, but in conjunction with a D made on the same principles there is not much by which to

recognise which is which, and from a distance the two are indistinguishable. Many engineers affect this style of letter, believing it to be devoid of that 'art-nonsense' on the absence of which they pride themselves. That newspaper-vendors should use the same style of letter is even more surprising. If th aims of engineers and newsagents were purely decorative, we could more easily appreciate their efforts, even though, to our more rational minds, names on locomotives and advertisements of the contents of more or less untrustworthy journals seem alike unnecessary.

¶ Legibility, in practice, amounts simply to what one is accustomed to. But this is not to say that because we have got used to something demonstrably less legible than something else would be if we could get used to it, we should make no effort to scrap the existing thing. This was done by the Florentines and Romans of the fifteenth century; it requires simply good sense in the originators & good will in the rest of us.¶ Good will seems to be the common possession of mankind, but its complement, good sense, i.e. intelligence, critical ability, and that intense concentration upon precise perfection which is a kind of genius, is not so common. Good will comes from below & occasionally penetrates into studios and cabinets. Good sense comes from above & percolates thro' the mass of people. Everybody thinks that he knows an A when he sees it (fig. 16); but only the few extraordinary rational minds can distinguish between a good one & a bad one, or can demonstrate precisely what constitutes A-ness. When is an A not an A? Or when is an R not an R (fig. 17)? It is clear that for any letter there is some sort of norm. To discover this norm is obviously the first thing to be done.

(Figure 14: 1 & 2 show the engineers' O & D, hardly distinguishable from one another; 3 & 4 show forms equally black, no wid but more legible, which are suitable where the space required for the normal, 5 & 6, is not available.)

Figure 15: Monotype sans-serif

¶ The first notable attempt to work out the norm for plain letters was made by Mr Edward Johnston when he designed the sans-serif letter for the London Underground Railways. Some of these letters a not entirely satisfactory, especially when it is remembered that, for such a purpose, an alphabet shou be as near as possible ‘fool-proof’, i.e. the forms should be measurable, patient of dialectical exposition, as the philosophers would say — nothing should be left to the imagination of the signwriter or the enamel plate maker. In this quality of ‘fool-proofness’ the Monotype sans-serif face (figure 15) is perhaps an improvement. The letters are more strictly normal — freer from forms depending upon appreciation and critical ability in the workman who has to reproduce them.

¶ But, as there is a norm of letter form — the bare body so to say, of letters — there is also a norm of letter clothes; or rather there are many norms according as letters are used for this place or purpose o that. Between the occasion wherein the pure sans-serif or mono-line (block) letter is appropriate & that in which nothing is more appropriate than pure fancifulness (see fig. 17, 9, 13, 15 & 16), there ar innumerable occasions.

¶ A typically moral and conscientious Englishman finds it exceedingly difficult to keep morals out o art talk; he finds himself inclined to think, e.g. that Rought to have a bow more or less semi-circular and of a diameter about half the height of the stem, & a strongly outstanding tail; that an R with a ver large bow and hardly any tail at all is wrong. But such moral notions as the word ‘ought’ implies, & such words as ‘right’ & ‘wrong’ — taken as having a moral connotation — are obviously absurd in such a discussion, and we should be ready to admit that any old shape will do to make a letter with. Nevertheless, special circumstances demand special treatment, and as a ‘confirmed drunkard’ may be well advised to ‘take the pledge’ & deck himself out with blue ribands, so, seeing the whirl of eccentricity into which modern advertising is driving us (fig. 18), it seems good and reasonable to return to some idea of normality, without denying ourselves the pleasure and amusement of designin all sorts of fancy letters whenever the occasion for such arises. Moreover, it seems clear that as a firm and hearty belief in Christian marriage enables one not only to make the best jokes about it but even break the rules with greater assurance (just as a man who knows his road can occasionally jump off it whereas a man who does not know his road can only be on it by accident), so a good clear training in the making of normal letters will enable a man to indulge more efficiently in fancy and impudence.

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