



# TYPOGRAPHY FOR THE PEOPLE

HAND-PAINTED SIGNS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

© INCLUDES CD WITH 15 FREE FONTS

DANIEL BELLON & KLAUS BELLON





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# 得記小菜火鍋

- STEAM PRAWNS IN GARLIC SAUCE
- FRIED PRAWNS with CASHEW NUTS
- STEAMED FISH with SOYA BEAN SAUCE
- POAST GOOSE Set
- SEAFOOD SOUP
- FRIED RICE
- FRIED NOODLE
- SOUP with SLICED SOUP
- BLUE GIRL BEER
- TSING TAO BEER
- SAN MIGUEL BEER
- SOFT DRINK (COCA COLA)

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# TYPOGRAPHY FOR THE PEOPLE

Hand-Painted Signs From Around the World

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Daniel Bellon and Klaus Bellon

**HOW**  
**BOOKS**  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
[www.howdesign.com](http://www.howdesign.com)

## TYPOGRAPHY FOR THE PEOPLE

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**To our father.**

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Without his inspiration, this book would never have been possible. A part of him lives in every page.

Gracias, Papi. Te extrañamos mucho.





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Kansas City, Missouri

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Dayton, Ohio



# Foreword

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## INNOCENT MESSAGES

I don't own the alphabet. But I wish I did. Imagine the royalties. When you consider all the people who use those twenty-six letters, even a few pennies a year in payments would add up to gazillions. Sweet.

The truth is, no one owns the alphabet. It's the original open-source software. Anyone is free to pick it up and put it to use. Indeed, that's one of the alphabet's great strengths. The more people who use it, the more valuable it becomes. The same can be said of words and language.

Still, the magic of the alphabet, words and language is so common that we can overlook the miracle. Billions of people can understand my language and recognize the words I write. Even if they are strangers or far away, I can craft a message that will make sense to them. It's astounding that some squiggles on a surface can produce thoughts in people's heads. Sometimes these marks can even make them think, believe or behave in a desired way. That writing is powerful stuff.

It's a miracle anyone can perform. After all, making the shapes of letters isn't hard. Kids can learn to draw a bunch of letters in an afternoon. The shapes are simple. And the level of precision required is very low. Almost any line that goes up, down, up, down will pass for the letter **M**. Only the absolute worst handwriting fails to be understood.

The environments most of us live in are full of written messages. Many of these messages are crafted by professional designers and marketing wizards who work for corporate clients. You see their work every day on TV and in magazines. But our environment is also full of vernacular messages created by ordinary people who haven't studied the niceties of typography and design. People who just have something to say.

Vernacular messages are ubiquitous, and that very fact makes them hard to notice. But if you really look, you'll begin to see plain-talking, hand-crafted and hand-lettered messages everywhere. Look for them on side streets and bulletin boards. There you can see the vernacular messages of the person having a garage sale, the business owner, or the kid who's lost a pet.

These people are trying to solve the same communication problem that professionals face. How can I make my message clear? How can I get people to pay attention? But their approaches can be wildly different. The most interesting ones gallop off in unexpected directions. They are bold, vigorous, innocent, charming, crude, witty, innovative or shocking. Still, they manage to be clear and capture our attention.

This book is full of such examples. Studying them can lead you to more interesting design

solutions.

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They suggest new ways to organize content, command attention, create surprising juxtapositions, exploit materials and deliver a message — all with almost no budget. In a few cases, the examples instruct by showing what to avoid.

Beyond all that, there's a broader message. Vernacular designs like these remind us that design and clear communication are bigger than any profession can contain. As Tibor Kalmar and Kerrie Jacobs wrote in **Print** in 1990, "The vernacular is designed as if design were a regular thing to do, and not the sacred mission of an elite professional class."

The problems our society faces are daunting. Design can help. But if we promote the notion that design is an activity for only learned experts, we're marching in the wrong direction. Design has never been reserved for designers and never should be. The innocent, frisky and peculiar examples in this book are a reminder that, at some level, we are all designers.

**Don Moyer**

[www.thoughtformdesign.com](http://www.thoughtformdesign.com)

Pittsburgh, September 2009



Detroit, Michigan



# By the People, for the People

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*by Daniel Bellon*

Letterforms are truly amazing symbols. One single line — the capital “I” for example — can express thousands of much more complex ideas. In English, it represents the sound “aye”. It's the nominative singular pronoun, used by a speaker in referring to himself or herself. In chemistry, it represents iodine; in biochemistry, isoleucine. In metaphysics, it represents the ego; in mathematics it represents the imaginary unit. In physics, it's not only the symbol for an electric current but also an isotopic spin. This single vertical line can be a noun, a pronoun, a prefix, a suffix, an affix, a prefix, and an abbreviation. One stroke of a pen or a brush has the power to describe a book's worth of information.

The first Western writing system is generally believed to have been invented in Sumer, by the late third millennium B.C., and developed into the archaic cuneiform. For thousands of years, written communication remained an exclusive engagement between those few who could write and those who could read. Around the 4th and 5th centuries, after the fall of the Roman empire, the only few with contact and knowledge of writing and letterforms in the West were the monks in monasteries in Europe. They copied manuscripts one at a time. As a result, books and reading were so rare that during the Middle Ages, the few books in existence in public libraries had to be chained to shelves and desks to prevent theft. In the 15th century, with the spread of Gutenberg's movable type, books could be mass-produced, and reading became a far more accessible pastime.

Today, it's obviously very easy to encounter type and letterforms in one form or another. You are interacting with type as you read this. Chances are, there are hundreds of other examples of typography around you right now. In modern society, we are bombarded with typographic messages. These messages are received and decoded by millions and millions of literate eyes. But who is delivering the message? Who put the letters together to convey the message? Sometimes they're trained graphic designers, and sometimes they're “amateur designers” who don't have a formal education in typography or design.

## What This Book Is Not

These days, anyone with a personal computer can lay out a newsletter and make a sign announcing “Pajama Friday” at the office. This book is not about these signs ([Figure 1](#)). It is also not about what I call “amateur typographers.” These are people who may not be classically trained designers but know a lot about typography, often without being aware of it. Graffiti artists, for example, spend years developing letterforms, the interaction of letters with each other, negative space and other elements in their compositions. As a former graffiti artist, I can tell you these guys take their typography very seriously. They are aware of serif, counters, ascenders and descenders, kerning, contrast, etc. (Figure 2). Also in this category of amateur typographers are professional sign painters. They are usually trained on the job by older craftsmen and often use their own interpretations of real typefaces. The results are



often remarkable and engaging (Figure 3). These sign painters, too, are aware of type layout, composition, and letterforms. Closely related to them are bartenders, restaurant employees, and Starbucks baristas, who change each day's special on a chalkboard. They may not understand the nuances of type design the way graffiti artists and sign painters do, but they develop a certain sensitivity to them if only by sheer repetition, and trial and error (Figure 4). This book is not about those who, knowingly or not, are trained in typography, or those who think they are.

## What This Book Is

This book is a celebration of typography and highlights the beauty of typography in its truest form — not as a profession but as a necessity of everyday life. The result may be humorous, unexpected and even charming, but for those who understand the rules that are being broken, these explorations of type design are often refreshing and even inspiring. We want to showcase pieces by the vast majority of people: those who have no knowledge of design, serifs, tracking or kerning and who create graphic design with their hands and break rules they don't even know exist. When people need to communicate, when they need to make a sign to announce a yard sale, they often call up their own creativity and, without the hindrance of rules and preconceptions, they design typography. They use markers, colored pencils, brush or sometimes unexpected media like electrical tape or cut-out paper. These experiments in typography are a constant reminder that, even though type and graphic designers often think of ourselves as the keepers of letterforms and typography, we do not own them. Typography belongs to everyone. Typography belongs to the people.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

## The Story Behind the Book

My brother Klaus and I have been working with type for a long time. As far back as I can remember, we were designing innumerable logos for our imaginary car companies and heavy metal bands. In high school, we had a photocopied punk rock magazine we painstakingly laid out using our father's typewriter, scissors and a stick of glue. So it was a natural progression for us to seek graphic design as a career choice. While attending the University of Cincinnati in the 1990s, I started to pay more attention to handmade signs and found their naive use of typography very interesting. I started photographing them, and I have been collecting images for almost seventeen years. Unfortunately, most of these images have not survived multiple relocations. Others were taken during the early days of digital photography and are doomed to remain in the world of 72 dpi for eternity. A few more are trapped in the purgatory that is corrupt files.

When we sat down to pick from the surviving images, I started to notice a few patterns. I noticed that a lot of people treated certain letters in very similar ways. It was a surprise, but a welcome one. I found it interesting and endearing that people from all over the world would create certain letters in the same way. For example, people really like making counters in circles (Figure 5). We also noticed a mixture of upper and lower case in the same words. People seem to love to use a lower case "i" in words that are all uppercase (Figure 6). Also, the thickness of vertical versus horizontal strokes that is second nature to designers is often reversed, creating very odd looking characters (Figure 7). Another interesting observation was the width of the letters "M" and "W." They seem to give people trouble and are usually squeezed to match the width of the letters around them (Figure 8). Sometimes ascenders don't ascend and descenders don't descend. Numbers can be all over the place. The numbers "2" and "5" tend to be malformed, sometimes to the point of illegibility (Figure 9). This experience has been fascinating, and after all these years we've come to appreciate these mishaps and look forward to them.

In the last five years, when we ramped up our effort to finish the book, collecting photographs became a hunt. The excitement we feel when we see a hand-crafted sign from a distance is indescribable. We take out the camera and take home the trophy of a good photograph for the collection. We quickly learned that most of these signs are found in unexpected locations, making these "hunting trips" quite exciting. We became professionals in the art of spotting a sign while driving at 45 mph, stopping two blocks past it, parking illegally, running back with our camera (which we now carry at all times) and snapping a couple of pictures from a few

different angles. Then, after dodging traffic while running back to the car, we start the necessary apologies to our fellow travelers.

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Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Another challenge is the odd reluctance of store owners, shopkeepers and other employees to allow us to photograph signs. We've been yelled and screamed at everywhere, from Harlem in New York City to street markets in Caracas to the suburbs of Hong Kong. In some South American countries, it is illegal to take pictures of buildings, so we have to avoid not only angry and aggressive civilians, but also the often less-than-friendly military police. (It's always a good idea to carry a little cash with you, just in case an officer asks for a donation in order to avoid a night in jail.) We have been all over the world searching for these images, and now we know that the best places to find signs are the less desirable areas of large cities. We skip tourist attractions when traveling. Instead, we spend our time convincing skeptical taxi cab drivers to take us to these places where no foreigner should go, especially when carrying more than a thousand dollars worth of photographic equipment.

In Caracas, a resident of one of these "colorful" neighborhoods took offense to my presence and insisted I leave and threw a brick at me. In retrospect, the dirty looks he'd been giving me since I arrived five minutes prior should have been warning enough. Fortunately for my lack of travel insurance at the time, he missed and I was able to scurry to the nearest subway station and laugh at myself when I realized the photo I was taking was completely out of focus and the incident had been a total waste of time anyway. After that, I was encouraged to hire bodyguards when traveling abroad. A lot of these guys were more bodyguards than guides, really. In Mexico City, after being rushed out of a pretty rough part of the Tepito neighborhood by my guide, I was informed we may have been shot at. *This is great*, I thought, *How could I have explained a bullet wound to my friends and family back home?*

As far as we know, none of the other folks who contributed images for the book were in harm's way, and we are very happy about that. We would never ask anyone to do the silly things we have done or go to the places we have.

It has been a memorable ride, and we are looking forward to a lot more hunting adventures.

Hopefully with no shots being fired.

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# Design and Non-Design Practitioners

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by Klaus Bellon

Design is communication. Just as humans cannot not communicate (as noted by psychologist Paul Watz-lawick), the objects, services and goods we produce are loaded with message whether we intend for them to be or not. But are all those who communicate through their objects and solutions they create designers? I strongly believe so. Sadly, most design professionals today would disagree with such a notion. The manner in which professional designers view solutions produced by non-design practitioners has fluctuated wildly between disgust and adoration, the latter often being coupled with an urgent need to document the type of design in order to later co-opt its form. More often than not, the adoration bestowed upon this type of design can best be explained by understanding the way that folk or outsider art has been viewed in the realm of fine art, primarily as an oddity to behold due to the lack of training that the artist has. Much like the bourgeoisie's infatuation with the working class — its values, aesthetics and apparent simplicity in thought — design professionals have idolized these objects for their apparent simplicity. Designers have not, however, taken their creator or intended audience seriously. As such, design professionals often degradingly call such individuals “uneducated,” forgetting that we are all designers.

The truth is that design by non-design practitioners (not “non-designers” or the “uneducated”) manages to cut through the fog of design movements and formal trends, as well as the realities of client meetings and budgets. This type of design manages to solve problems at a base level, addressing only the primary concerns at hand and, more often than not, communicating with its intended audience very successfully. “Folk design” (a term I will use unwillingly, due to the lack of a more appropriate one) manages to be inclusive in who it communicates with. Additionally, this kind of design manages to communicate a great deal about the person producing the piece of design, as well as her intent. No small feat when one considers that this is exactly what designers who have been trained under the tenets of modernism strive for. Folk design manages to — using scientist Warren Weaver's terminology as put forth in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* — “deliver a signal from the transmitter to the receiver with minimal noise.” This is a significant achievement, considering how seemingly flawed its aesthetic qualities appear to be, an obvious lesson which tells us that clarity in design is not always dependent on formal purity.

From the improvised stool made out of a milk crate and the trash bag used as a raincoat to the hand-painted sign for a roadside business ([Figure 1](#)), folk design possesses a sincerity and a simplicity that came to all of us naturally before we received a formal design education, whether through traditional means or through intensive work in the field coupled with trial and error.

It's with this in mind that I propose that designers don't dislike and therefore criticize folk design out of a sense of entitlement (though it would certainly appear that way). I also don't believe that designers are wary of folk design because they view themselves as the lone

keepers of taste, order and sanity in a world seemingly unwilling to conform to our views of aesthetic perfection. No. The truth, I would like to propose, is even stranger and perhaps more sinister. Designers are all rather envious of the freedom that is afforded to design solutions completed by non-design practitioners. Much like adults who admire the playful instincts of a child and long for those days, professional designers long for the ability to communicate simpler messages in a more impulsive, straightforward manner. This is particularly true when it comes to graphic solutions designed by “outsiders” (again, I use the term unwillingly for lack of a better one) to the field.

Of all the forms that folk design could take, graphic communication is perhaps the most common. This is due in large part to the common need we all have to communicate graphically, as well as the relative ease with which information can be shared in this medium. As such, graphic design created by non-design practitioners is perhaps the most abundant and poignant form of folk design around us. It should be noted, however, that folk design exists in almost all areas of design and at all levels of complexity, but it is primarily limited to what Hugh Dubberly refers to as “static” and “dynamic” systems. Dubberly defines static systems as those pieces of design that are not able to act on their own, and consequently have little to no effect on their surroundings. Dynamic systems, on the other hand, can act on their own and thus are able to change their relationship to the environment that surrounds them.

As such, the design systems usually taken up by most non-design practitioners are logical problems for them to tackle, since they are in essence analogous to basic, everyday verbal communication.

Having said that, there is still real value in this seemingly simple way of communicating. The value lies in its honesty and simplicity, but most importantly in its inclusion of a clear point of view and a clear understanding of the intended audience. It's these last two features in particular that are nearly always present in folk design but seldom, if ever, in design produced by many of today's professionals. Understandably, the task of having a point of view and clear understanding of an intended audience is rather simple when the message being communicated is as simple as “Hubcaps” ([Figure 2](#)), but I must ask: How much more efficiently would a professional design convey this message to its intended audience? More importantly, when the message is intended to communicate to everyone, would a “designed” piece do more harm than good when attempting to communicate such a straightforward message? Considering how our visual landscape is littered with soulless design that appears to be produced by no one, speaks to no one, and consequently excites no one, chances are that a professional's take would not be significantly better.

What is the cause of this design failure? Again, we must go back to our lack of focus and carelessness, which falls in line with what literary critic Wayne C. Booth describes as the “pedant's stance.” On the subject of written communication, Booth explains that this approach consists of “ignoring or underplaying the personal relationship of speaker and audience....” As such, all design can benefit from having a clear sense of its intended audience, and placing great importance on that relationship. If the segment of the population that a piece of design is to speak to is far too broad, audience segmentation and the creation of archetypes within that segment can be helpful in defining the audience. We must look deeper into who our



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