

type

The SECRET HISTORY *of* LETTERS

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In 1945 Germany's type business, like the rest of the country's infrastructure, was left devastated in the aftermath of the Allied invasion that had finally brought the Third Reich to its knees and an end to the war in Europe. The Frankfurt factories of Bauer, manufacturers of Futura, were destroyed, although all the punches and matrices had been removed for safety. The story was a similar one for Stempel, also with headquarters in Frankfurt, for Berthold in Berlin and Klingspor in Offenbach.

The victorious Allies were careful not to repeat the error of the 1919 peace settlement; the understandable desire to extract compensation from Germany after the earlier conflict left the country in a permanently weakened state, a perfect breeding ground for the discontent and resentment that Hitler was able to exploit so effectively. There was now the ominous presence of Soviet Russia to consider, in occupation of a sizeable chunk of the former Reich – what was to become for over forty years the East German Republic. If the rest of Germany was not to fall under Soviet domination, bringing the edge of communist Europe – Winston's Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' – to the borders of France, Belgium and Holland, then money and aid had to be injected into the shattered region, if only for political considerations.

American support enabled the new state of West Germany to recover rapidly, achieving by the 1960s an unimagined prosperity with a modern and successful democratic system. In this resurgent economy, the type foundries were viable forces again by the late 1950s; indeed, Bauer had rebuilt their Frankfurt factory by 1948. But the German typographic landscape had been changed for ever by the war. Black letter as a dominant form was now gone, but most of the foundries that had produced roman type had been concentrated around the book trade, based largely in Leipzig, now part of East Germany. New faces were needed in the west, and a new German typographical star would emerge to help meet this need.

Hermann Zapf had been born in 1918 in Nuremberg.

His father had been a trade union official in a car factory, but was removed from his post in 1933 by the new Nazi regime. The punishment extended to his son; Hermann was forbidden access to further education. Abandoning his plans to become an electrical engineer, he took up an apprenticeship as a printer's retoucher. But inspired by an exhibition of Rudolf Koch's calligraphy, Zapf began to teach himself the art; once again Edward's Johnston's *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering* proved an invaluable aid. His apprenticeship over, he set himself to learn about printing with hand presses and punch-cutting, and by 1939 was working on his first type design, a black letter, for Stempel.

Zapf's career was interrupted by conscription into the German Army in 1941. He worked as a cartographer in France, but managed to find time nevertheless to draw a flower alphabet, which Stempel produced after the war. On his return to civilian life, he became art director at the company, and was soon to design his first great typeface, Palatino, its forms inspired by Renaissance lettering, and bearing the unmistakable fluid strokes of the penman. In 1952 he designed Melior as a newspaper text face, and in 1958 Optima, a remarkable design described by Zapf as a 'serifless Roman', and by other commentators as a 'flared sans serif'. He remained a prolific designer and writer on typography for over three decades.

Following Nazi persecution Jan Tschichold had moved with his family to Switzerland, and stayed there for the duration of the war, fortunate to find enough work to survive. In 1941 he began working full time for a publisher, and in 1942 obtained Swiss citizenship. In 1935 his work had been exhibited in England, and the publishers Lund Humphries asked him to design their Penrose Annual in 1937.

It was a useful showcase. In 1947 Allen Lane, the director of British paperback publishers Penguin Books, decided it was time for a visual overhaul. Tschichold was invited to take on the task, and he laid down design guidelines that gave a new elegance and refinement to the books' typography. He was also responsible for the redesign of the company logo, from the charming, slightly hunched and shuffling penguin then in use to the more streamlined badge still current – a small loss amidst a huge gain.



60 Palatino: Hermann Zapf found early guidance and inspiration from the writings of Edward Johnston, and Palatino reflects the unmistakable touch of the calligrapher in its letter forms.



61 Optima: described as a 'serifless Roman', or a 'flared sans serif', it is a cool, elegant face that defies precise classification.

Tschichold managed to achieve these changes despite his struggles with the English language, and some resistance within the company to the 'foreigner' who had been brought in. But he was also able to use the language as a shield, sometimes overriding resistance with a pretence of non-comprehension. Typical of his autocratic style was a written battle of wills with Dorothy L. Sayers, the detective story writer, over three asterisks that Tschichold had placed on the title page of her translation of Dante's *Inferno*. Sayers couldn't see the point of them, and cited an opinion (Tschichold's own) that an asterisk had no place on a title page. Tschichold replied, 'It is the master who establishes the rules and not the pupil, and the master is permitted to break the rules, even his own.'[1]

Sayers graciously conceded, probably feeling that the whole matter had outgrown its importance, but if this altercation makes Tschichold sound unchanged from the uncompromising character of his youth, this wasn't entirely the case. He had moderated some of his opinions, even so far as to be tolerant of centred designs. Hans Schmoller, who succeeded Tschichold at Penguin, recalled how, when asked why his early work was so different to his later, Tschichold replied: 'Because I didn't know enough.' Schmoller explains this later change of opinion: '[he] linked his earlier dogmatism with the unhappy German bent for absolutes and for regimentation, which he felt he had left behind.'[2]

With hindsight, Tschichold felt that this kind of hard-line opinion was exactly the approach the Nazis had taken; 'I detected the most shocking parallels,' he later reflected.[3] Indeed, in terms of typeface design his finest achievement is a serif face, not a sans serif. A group of German printers wanted a typeface that would look the same whether set by hand or on Monotype or Linotype machines. Tschichold produced Sabon, named after the French punch-cutter reputed to have brought the Garamond matrices to Frankfurt. It is one of the very best serif text faces, beautifully weighted, superbly readable, elegant yet friendly at the same time, an extremely difficult combination to achieve. It had a dignified gentleness that had permeated to other areas of Tschichold's life too; he collected *spitzen bilder*, eighteenth-century pictures in lacy paper vignettes – rather like early valentines – and Victorian greetings cards.

1 Ruari McLean, *Jan Tschichold: A Life in Typography*, London, 1997.

2 Hans Schmoller, *Two Titans, Mardersteig and Tschichold, a study in contrasts*, New York, 1990.

3 McLean, *Jan Tschichold*.

He was honoured with numerous international awards, and on his seventieth birthday in 1972 the Swiss magazine *Typographische Monatsblätter* ran a tribute entitled 'Jan Tschichold Praeceptor Typographiae', which stated: 'two men stand out as the greatest typographic motive forces of the twentieth century: Stanley Morison and Jan Tschichold'. The article was attributed to Reminiscor, 'he who remembers'. It was by Tschichold himself. He died in 1974.

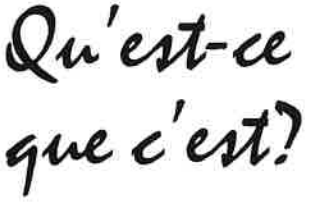
The French verve for distinctive type design was maintained in the 1950s by that most creative foundry, Deberny and Peignot, and by Roger Excoffon (1910–83), whose designs were to personify French style in the 1960s in a way that Cassandre had done thirty years before.

Rebelling against his parents' wishes for him to become a lawyer, Excoffon had decided instead to be an artist. Born in Marseilles, he was drawn inevitably to Paris, but by the end of the war he was back in his native Provence. His brother-in-law, Marcel Olive, ran a type foundry, Fonderie Olive, which had benefited from the German wartime division of France. Deberny and Peignot was in Paris, in the occupied zone in the north, while Fonderie Olive lay in Vichy France, the larger portion of the country supervised by Marshal Pétain's collaborationist government. Deberny and Peignot could no longer send metal type south, so Olive were able to take over their markets, and expand.

Following the success of his first face, Chambourd, Excoffon became art director at Olive in 1947, a flexible arrangement which allowed him to run his own design company as well. In the 1950s he created a series of highly popular informal or script advertising faces – Banco, Choc, Diane and that digital favourite, Mistral. In his determination to produce a design for metal type without losing the handwritten quality, Excoffon avoided a constant baseline for Mistral's characters, and had an alternative lower case character that could serve as either an l or a p.

His most distinctive design, and his answer to the new wave of 1950s sans serifs, was Antique Olive. Using the principle of the x-height area and the ascenders being most crucial for legibility, he designed a face with very short ascenders; in the bolder weights it is absolutely

unmistakable, a uniqueness that doubtless prevented its global domination as a go-anywhere sans serif. A version of it was used for the Air France logo. Excoffon's personality and design philosophy have been described as 'a peculiar mixture of logic and flamboyant elaboration', a combination both very French and universally appealing.[4]



62 Mistral, Excoffon's most enduring script, popular in digital form. Somehow it always looks its best in French.

For Cassandre the ending was not to be a happy one. Having served in the French Army until the 1940 armistice, he returned to Paris, and in the post-war years gradually drifted from poster design to theatrical sets and costumes. The most enduring work of his later years, and a design visible to anyone walking past a department store perfume counter, is the Yves Saint Laurent logo, a beautiful piece of lettering drawn for the couturier in 1963.

But his final years were dogged by increasing depression. His first suicide attempt was on 17 June 1967; the second, successful attempt took place exactly a year later. A letter from a German foundry lay on his desk, rejecting his final, delightful typeface as too revolutionary for them to consider. It was named Cassandre after his death, and a version called Metop was used for Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris.



63 Antique Olive: Excoffon's sans serif never achieved world domination, perhaps because of its overabundant personality. The ascenders and descenders are very short.

Had Orson Welles composed his famous speech in the film *The Third Man* – in which he reduces the Swiss contribution to world culture to the cuckoo clock – a decade later, he could at least have considered typography as an item in the nation's credit account. The 1950s and 1960s were to see a dominant Swiss influence, both in design style and the typefaces used to implement it, for it was from there that the next significant sans serifs would come. One, Helvetica, was destined along with Times Roman to be the world's most successful typeface. Although its popularity may now have waned in the face of the mass of new sans serifs which have been designed in the last decade, it is still inescapable, often the default face on computer programs. Along with its contemporary, Univers, it would become the medium for the school of Swiss design – grid-based, ranged-left typography, using one typeface only in a selection of different weights. It was a logical progression of the ideas of Switzerland's adopted son, Tschichold.

4 Julia Thrift, 'Roger Excoffon', *Baseline* 14, 1991.

The designer of Univers, Adrian Frutiger, was born near Interlaken in 1928. After studying at the School of Fine Arts in Zurich, he joined Deberny and Peignot in 1952. By this time the company was looking at typographical alternatives to metal type. They were developing an adhesive alphabet system called Typophane, and had gained French distribution rights for the Lumitype photosetting machine. Frutiger supervised the adaptation of classic faces to the new machine, but he also worked on his own designs. The most notable was a sans serif face he had first started designing while still a student; it was Univers, the first face to be designed simultaneously for metal and photosetting. As type families go, Univers was a huge one – twenty-one members – and Frutiger created a unique numbering system to replace the customary 'bold', 'italic', 'medium condensed' tags. The first numeral denoted the weight of the face, and the second the amount by which it was condensed, so Univers 39 was light but very condensed, and Univers 83 was extra bold and expanded.

Neville Brody (see Chapter 18) was later to call Univers 'the coldest face ever designed': 'It's so mechanically pure in its intentions that it's still-born, it can't communicate any emotive quality whatever.'[5] It's hard to disagree. Univers only ever gains any character in the condensed or expanded versions. The straight-down-the-middle Univers 55, the medium weight, is, apart from the flat tail of the capital Q, devoid of any distinctive features – cool, eminently well designed and yet strangely enervated. Its position as the face that would typify Swiss style was immediately challenged by the arrival of Helvetica.

The designer of this worldwide phenomenon was Max Miedinger (1910–80), an in-house designer for the Swiss Foundry Haas, based in Munchenstein. *Typographische Monatsblätter* had made his previous face, Pro Arte, its alphabet of the month for July 1955. Described as a Modern-style Italian, it was a heavily serifed condensed face, clearly inspired by the early-nineteenth-century display faces. It gave no hint of what was to come.

In 1956 Miedinger was asked by Edouard Hoffman of Haas to design a new sans serif face, with the aim of superseding Akzidenz Grotesk, an 1890s German sans serif that was still proving extremely popular. Although Miedinger started with the brief of updating Haas's exist-

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64 Univers: Adrian Frutiger's multi-versioned family. Efficient, but the coldest typeface ever produced?

5 Jan Wozencroft, *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody*, vol. 1, London, 1988.



65 Helvetica: Max Miedinger's design inexplicably escapes the chilliness of Univers, and swiftly became the definitive Swiss-style typeface.

ing sans serif, Haas Grotesk, the resulting face took on a life of its own. Originally entitled New Haas Grotesk, it was adopted in 1961 by Stempel, the German parent company of Haas, for sale to their home market. Unwilling to release a typeface that bore another company's name, Stempel unilaterally renamed it. The result, Helvetica, was greeted with disapproval by Hoffman. As a corruption of the Latin name for Switzerland, Helvetia, he considered it highly unsuitable, but the name remained.

Helvetica's popularity was built on two factors; it was representative of a design philosophy – Swiss style. But while being well drawn, it also had little to distinguish it, or cause offence. Helvetica has been called the typeface with no distinguishing features. It can go anywhere, do anything; it's everything – and nothing. Yet, it does have some elusive quality that gives it a friendlier feel than Univers. But Miedinger himself was not to reap the proportionate financial rewards for this world-beater. The introduction of royalty systems for typeface usage by Herb Lubalin's International Typeface Corporation would not happen until the 1970s, bringing benefits to designers that Miedinger, paid a straight company wage, would only be able to envy.