

IN 1923 JAN TSCHICHOLD, A TWENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD GERMAN TYPOGRAPHER, ATTENDED THE BAUHAUS EXHIBITION IN WEIMAR. HE WAS MESMERIZED. The exhibition was bursting with works of art and design influenced by De Stijl and constructivism. These vivid examples of the then emerging New Typography changed him. For the next decade Tschichold put aside his classical training, including his affection for symmetrical design, and became a powerful advocate of the new modern typographic movement. In 1928 he wrote his seminal book *The New Typography*, which opened these ideas to the printing industry in a clear, accessible manner. Theories became rules, while complex experiments became simple, reproducible systems. Tschichold's book remains essential to any typographic library. We remember him, though, not just for his passionate argument for the New Typography but also for his equally fervent turn against it. After being imprisoned by the Nazis and later escaping to Basel during World War II, Tschichold reconsidered. In the purifying order of the New Typography he sensed an element of fascism. During the latter part of his life he turned back to the classical typography of his early training.

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

JAN TSCHICHOLD | 1928

The essence of the New Typography is clarity. This puts it into deliberate opposition to the old typography whose aim was “beauty” and whose clarity did not attain the high level we require today. This utmost clarity is necessary today because of the manifold claims for our attention made by the extraordinary amount of print, which demands the greatest economy of expression. The gentle swing of the pendulum between ornamental type, the (superficially understood) “beautiful” appearance, and “adornment” by extraneous additions (ornaments) can never produce the pure form we demand today. Especially the feeble clinging to the bugbear of arranging type on a central axis results in the extreme inflexibility of contemporary typography.

In the old typography, the arrangement of individual units is subordinated to the principle of arranging everything on a central axis. In my historical introduction I have shown that this principle started in the Renaissance and has not yet been abandoned. Its superficiality becomes obvious when we look at Renaissance or baroque title pages. Main units are arbitrarily cut up: for example, logical order, which should be expressed by the use of different type sizes, is ruthlessly sacrificed to external form. Thus the principal line contains only three-quarters of the title, and the rest of the title, set several sizes smaller, appears in the next line. Such things admittedly do not often

happen today, but the rigidity of central-axis setting hardly allows work to be carried out with the degree of logic we now demand. The central axis runs through the whole like an artificial, invisible backbone: its *raison d'être* is today as pretentious as the tall white collars of Victorian gentlemen. Even in good central-axis composition the contents are subordinated to “beautiful line arrangement.” The whole is a “form” that is predetermined and therefore must be inorganic.

We believe it is wrong to arrange a text as if there were some focal point in the center of a line that would justify such an arrangement. Such points of course do not exist, because we read by starting at one side (Europeans for example read from left to right, the Chinese from top to bottom and right to left). Axial arrangements are illogical because the distance of the stressed, central parts from the beginning and end of the word sequences is not usually equal but constantly varies from line to line.

But not only the preconceived idea of axial arrangement but also all other preconceived ideas—like those of the pseudo-Constructivists—are diametrically opposed to the essence of the New Typography. Every piece of typography that originates in a preconceived idea of form, of whatever kind, is wrong. The New Typography is distinguished from the old by the fact that its first objective is to develop its visible form out of the functions of the text. It is essential to give pure and direct expression to the contents of whatever is printed; just as in the works of technology and nature, “form” must be created out of function. Only then can we achieve a typography that expresses the spirit of modern man. The function of printed text is communication, emphasis (word value), and the logical sequence of the contents.

left: Newspaper advertisement (Münchner Neueste Nachrichten) Bad, because: unnecessary ornaments, too many kinds of type and type sizes (7), centered design, which makes reading difficult and is unsightly.

right: The same advertisement, redesigned by Jan Tschichold. Good, because: no use of ornament, clear type, few sizes (in all, only 5 different types), good legibility, good appearance.

Captions and illustrations from *The New Typography* by Jan Tschichold.

**Kaufmännische
Ausbildung**
Private kaufmännische Kurse
Dr. Sabel
Inh. *Therese Sabel*
München, Kaufingerstr. 14/2
Telefon 91064
Jahreskurse für schulentlassene Knaben
u. Mädchen. Beginn: 16. April
Halbjahreskurse: Beginn: 1. Mai
Unterricht in Einzelfächern. Anmeld. täglich.
Angenehme Zahlungsbedingung. *[18767]2-2

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Centered layout using lightweight sans serif has no visual effectiveness and reaches a “typographic low” for today (letterhead for a bookshop).

Caption and illustration from *The New Typography* by Jan Tschichold.

THE METHOD OF NEW TYPOGRAPHY IS BASED ON A CLEAR REALIZATION OF PURPOSE AND THE BEST MEANS OF ACHIEVING IT. NO MODERN TYPOGRAPHY; BE IT EVER SO “BEAUTIFUL,” IS “NEW” IF IT SACRIFICES PURPOSE TO FORM.

JAN TSCHICHOLD
“New Life in Print”
1930

BUCHVERTRIEB
G M B H
» DAS POLITISCHE BUCH «
BERLIN-SCHMARGENDORF

13.12.1926.
B.H./Sch.

Every part of a text relates to every other part by a definite, logical relationship of emphasis and value, predetermined by content. It is up to the typographer to express this relationship clearly and visibly through type sizes and weight, arrangement of lines, use of color, photography, etc. The typographer must take the greatest care to study how his work is read and ought to be read.

[...]

Working through a text according to these principles will usually result in a rhythm different from that of former symmetrical typography. Asymmetry is the rhythmic expression of functional design. In addition to being more logical, asymmetry has the advantage that its complete appearance is far more optically effective than symmetry.

Hence the predominance of asymmetry in the New Typography. Not least, the liveliness of asymmetry is also an expression of our own movement and that of modern life; it is a symbol of the changing forms of life in general when asymmetrical movement in typography takes the place of symmetrical repose. This movement must not, however, degenerate into unrest or chaos. A striving for order can, and must, also be expressed in asymmetrical form. It is the only way to make a better, more natural order possible, as opposed to symmetrical form, which does not draw its laws from within itself but from outside.

Furthermore, the principle of asymmetry gives unlimited scope for variation in the New Typography. It also expresses the diversity of modern life, unlike central-axis typography, which, apart from variations of typeface (the only exception), does not allow such variety.

While the New Typography allows much greater flexibility in design, it also encourages “standardization” in the construction of units, as in building.

An example of pseudo-modern typography. The compositor has the idea of a prefabricated foreign shape and forces the words into it. But typographic form must be organic, it must evolve from the nature of the text.

Caption and illustration from *The New Typography* by Jan Tschichold.



The old typography did the opposite: it recognized only one basic form, the central-axis arrangement, but allowed all possible and impossible construction elements (typefaces, ornaments, etc.).

The need for clarity in communication raises the question of how to achieve clear and unambiguous form.

Above all, a fresh and original intellectual approach is needed, avoiding all standard solutions. If we think clearly and approach each task with a fresh and determined mind, a good solution will usually result.

The most important requirement is to be objective. This, however, does not mean a way of design in which everything is omitted that used to be tacked on, as in the letterhead “Das politische Buch” shown here [see p. 37]. The type is certainly legible and there are no ornaments whatever. But this is not the kind of objectivity we are talking about. A better name for it would be “meagerness.” Incidentally this letterhead also shows the hollowness of the old principles: without “ornamental” typefaces they do not work.

And yet, it is absolutely necessary to omit everything that is not needed. The old ideas of design must be discarded and new ideas developed. It is obvious that functional design means the abolition of the “ornamentation” that has reigned for centuries...

Today we see in a desire for ornament an ignorant tendency that our century must repress. When in earlier periods ornament was used, often in an extravagant degree, it only showed how little the essence of typography, which is communication, was understood.