From the God-Awful to the Transcendent: Why Handlettering is Not Type

"No typeface would have worked as well as this hand-lettered type by ..." writes Ilene Strizver in the latest edition of Type Rules! The Designer’s Guide to Professional Typography. If there is a phrase—with or without the hyphen—that drives me nuts, it is "handlettered type." It is everywhere. It is in books and magazines (including Print) and on blogs. It is on Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr and Tumblr. It is a contradictory phrase. If it is type, it is not lettering, and vice versa. With one tiny exception (read on), there is no such thing as "handlettered type." Contrary to Humpty Dumpty, being the master of a word does not mean defining it however one wants. Words are defined so that people can converse and understand one another. Words can, and do, change their meaning over time. Witness "font" and "kern" since the advent of the Macintosh and the broadening of the world of type to include anyone who uses a computer. Words are invented when old ones fail to fit a new situation. Thus, "blog" and "email." But "handlettered type" is neither an old word that has taken on a new meaning, nor a new word coined to describe something that has never existed before. It is simply a sign of ignorance or laziness.

"Type" refers to prefabricated letters that can be set, rearranged, disassembled and reused. Its forms are fixed by a designer, not created by a user. This is true whether the type is cast from molten metal, routed out of wood, imaged on film or constructed of pixels. "Lettering" describes letters that have been drawn by hand, no matter whether the tool is a pencil, ballpoint pen, quill or even a vector-based software program. It involves combining letters to form a composition that is greater than the sum of its parts. The individual letters cannot be taken apart and put back together to form another word or phrase without some damage being done to the overall design.

In the 1990s, Stephen Doyle designed a Champion paper promotional brochure containing an essay by Václav Havel, then the president of the new Czech Republic. At first glance, the printed piece looked as if it was set in type, but then it became apparent that something was weird. The letters were not perfect, especially as the text progressed—and presumably Doyle’s hand got tired of drawing lots of tiny letters. This is the only situation where the phrase "handlettered type" is appropriate: when lettering deliberately tries, tightly or loosely, to mimic a specific typeface. But lettering that looks like type is still lettering and not type. Sure, type—even much digital type—begins life as letters created manually, by someone doodling, sketching, drawing or writing with a pencil, pen or brush on paper. But at that point there is no type. There is only a sketch or a drawing for what will eventually become a typeface. The often-reproduced drawings of Gill Sans and Optima letters by Eric Gill and Hermann Zapf, respectively, are not type, but only stages along the way.

The present-day confusion about the distinction between lettering and type can be blamed on several factors. The first is that those who were born after 1980 have grown up in a digital world. Type is no longer tangible, something that can be held in the hand. Pixels have replaced metal and wood. Today, type exists as an image, something that can be seen. For those familiar only
with fonts, every letter onscreen or in print is presumed to be a character in a typeface. The second factor is that, in the past 20 years, the discontinuation of classes in penmanship in American elementary schools has left many designers under the age of 40 with little experience in the physical act of creating letters. They have been “writing” with keyboards their entire lives. They may be adults, but their handwriting frequently resembles that of young children. They be adults, but their handwriting frequently creates letters. They have been “writing” has left many designers under the age of 40 in a world of photocomposition and Letraset—a decision that was reinforced with the shift to digital design in the late 1980s. Educators believed that hand-skills were antiquated. Thus, most young designers have not had firsthand experience learning how to draw letters outside of a program like Adobe Illustrator. Not only do they not know how to draw letters, they don’t fully understand the hard work that is required to achieve the lettering of quality. Instead, anything done by hand is applauded. Witness the fawning adoration that green and yellow midcentury handlettering work posted online in recent years. Or look at the largely abysmal work gathered in the Little Book of Lettering by Emily Gregory (Chronicle Books, 2012). (At least the author doesn’t describe the work as “hand lettered type.”)

What has driven the use of the term “handlettered type” is the resurgent interest in things crafty, from letterpress printing to sign painting. There is a new interest in nontypographic digital letters. It has fueled the popularity of lettering walks in cities (often erroneously called “type tours”) along with new classes in lettering and calligraphy. “Handmade” is a badge of honor in contemporary design, like “organic” is in the world of food. We thus get the other oxymoron “handmade type.” The growing excitement about letters made by hand is a positive thing. But a proper understanding of the differences among the various branches of letter making—calligraphy, drawn lettering, sign painting, letter carving and type design—is essential. And so too is an awareness that not everything made by hand is intrinsically good; that, like any other human activity, lettering ranges from the God-awful to the transcendent.

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Where We Are and Where We’re Going: Type Trends as an Expression of Culture

BY STEPHEN COLES

An attempt to summarize typographic trends is doomed to fail—or at least fall short. Type design and typography, after all, are diverse fields, and despite the internet’s ability to spread work quickly and globally, typographic style can be quite regional. Still, there are some palpable tendencies as one surveys the design landscape. And, perhaps more than other creative elements, type can truly be like fashion: en vogue one moment, and derided the next. So, with that hefty caveat, here is a few of the distinct type trends most prevalent over the past two to three years.

Major font retailers list their current bestsellers—all of which indicate that layerable typefaces are unusually popular today. These font families have vintage ornamental styles that can be overlaid for color, fill, dimensional and shading effects. Other typefaces inspired by hand-painted and handmade signs, like brush scripts and mid-century gothics, are increasingly prevalent as well—especially in America. Some of these trends span from the dull aping of style that is inevitable in any creative field. Social media’s ability to share design ideas fast and wide makes it a very effective carrier of viral fads. This is never as obvious as it is on networks like Twitter. Bold, adventurous ideas are even more rare than usual.

But also, and more interestingly, much of the typographic we see today is a reflection of our culture at large. It can tell us something about where we are and where we’re going. The popularity of vintage type and motifs represents a general cultural nostalgia that often accompanies economic recession. When times are tough, society tends to look backward to better days. We retreat to safety. Bold, adventurous ideas are even more rare than usual.

Trends can also be, however, a simple swing of the fashion pendulum. After two decades of digital domination, we are drawn to the raw, the natural and the handmade. The type styles mentioned thus far are generally the response of font-makers to customer demand, following a thread that already exists in the design zeitgeist. But a penchant for the retro is apparent among trendsetting foundries as well. One example is the unlikely surge of the high-contrast sans serif, a decidedly antique genre that hasn’t seen wide use since World War II. In 2010, Font Bureau released David Jona than Ross’ Condor; Tal Leming followed two years later with Timonium; and now, within recent months, four different large families in this style have been released or announced: Beaustice (Fatatype), Darby Sans (Commercial Type), Domaine Sans (Kim) and Granville (Production Type). I welcome this foundry-initiated attempt to popularize the unpopular, but I wonder if the constraint-y sans can really catch fire like the earthy wood and brush stuff has. Let’s hope.

Beyond stylistic trends, we’re also seeing new technology used to produce more useful and innovative type. Web-develop ers form a new breed of font users and makers who look at digital type in ways that traditional print designers never imagined. Travis Kochel’s FF Chartwell, for example, harnesses OpenType features for nontypographic ends, translating numerals into graphs. Icon webfonts are another innovation that shows the need for small, open fonts. These fonts are now commonly used as a quick and flexible way to display icons and other symbols. Some webfont products, like Symbolset, use ligatures to transform words into icons. Using common terms makes the icons easy to access and index.

The increased rate of font production combined with the speed at which design trends travel is contributing to a new methodology for typeface design. We are in an era in which the users of type have a much greater influence on what new typefaces will be designed and released, and the evidence of that influence should only grow in 2015. The type-makers (and users) who see beyond the cosmic surface of these trends will be the ones who are seen as the pioneers.

“Trends can also be a simple swing of the fashion pendulum. After two decades of digital domination, we are drawn to the raw, the natural and the handmade.”

By Stephen Coles

Paul Shaw is a designer and design historian. He teaches typography and calligraphy at Parsons School of Design, and the history of graphic design at the School of Visual Arts. He is the editor-in-chief of Codex, a series of volumes on aspects of letterforms.
Peeking Through a Keyhole: The Hidden Universe Beyond the Keyboard

The history of typography is punctuated by revolutions that radically changed how we communicate through the printed page. More than just speeding up the typographic interface, these technological milestones have expanded the capacity of its 40-odd keys; the addition of the Cmd/Ctrl and Alt keys doubled the count again to just under 200. Yet, since the early days of computer typesetting, the restrictions of the keyboard as a typographic interface have proven to be a considerable stumbling block. Users are forced to peek at fonts through a metaphorical keyhole. A staggering number of users, aware of only the keys available on their computer, have no clue how to build an OpenType-friendly type. Adobe, whose OpenType font format in 2000 brought the most significant technological leap in typesetting in over 500 years, until the invention of the typewriter, which introduced typesetting in the late 19th century, is only now fully opening up these possibilities to get the stepchild treatment in the Creative Suite, Adobe Photoshop still has no glyph windows. Illustrators and Stylistic Sets, and users of InDesign have to dig three levels deep into foldout menus before they reach advanced OpenType functionality. The problem is not isolated to Adobe products—nobody seems to have a clue how to build an OpenType-friendly type interface. However, Adobe's very own Adobe Type department, which just like FontShop supported the under-appreciation of the OpenType font format, has remained resolutely ahistorical, this decorative extravagance was not simply countercultural but explicitly subversive. This tendency prefigures postmodern graphics, but its wider signification with criminality. Published in German a year after Jan Tschichold's Elements und Verbrechen...
Lost Designs: Making Digital Versions of Wood Type

by Richard Kegler

The first digital fonts that went beyond pixel screen fonts were commissioned classic typefaces. By the end of the 1970s, digital fonts were being created by hand, using digitizing tablets and computer-aided design (CAD) software. The process involved digitizing the outlines of the typefaces, which could then be stored on magnetic tape or disk.

In the early 1980s, the IBM PC introduced a new format for fonts, called TrueType. This format allowed for better quality and more flexibility than the existing pixel-based fonts. Designers could now create fonts that were scalable and could be resized without losing quality.

By the late 1980s, the availability of personal computers had increased, and designers were able to create and distribute fonts more easily. This led to a boom in the creation of digital fonts.

Improving Everyone’s Reading Experience: Think about Typography

by Indra Kupferschmid

Typography is a tool for making our content legible and engaging. It helps us to communicate ideas, emotions, and information in a way that is easy to read and understand.

When designing a website, it is important to consider the role that typography plays in the overall design. Typography can convey a sense of formality or informality, seriousness or playfulness, and can set the tone and mood of the content.

There are a few basic rules to follow when designing typography:

• Keep it simple. Don’t use too many fonts or too many colors.
• Choose the right font for the job. Make sure the font is appropriate for the content and context.
• Consider readability. Think about the size, weight, and contrast of the font.
• Use typography to create hierarchy. Make sure the most important information is easy to find.
• Be mindful of the overall design. Typography is just one part of the design equation.

Typography can be used to create visual interest, convey emotion, and communicate information. It is a powerful tool that can help you to create engaging and effective designs.
in 1977, Erik Spiekermann lost all of his metal type equipment, types and presses in an overnight fire. All that was left under a London railway arch, where it had rested, was a large chunk of lead. This was a tragic experience, but it must have been an eye-opener at the same time. Technology had moved on in the 1970s, and Spiekermann decided to keep up with it from that point. A year later, his first revival type design was released for photocomposition, and in 1985 he was one of the first to purchase a Macintosh computer in Germany.

This past summer, Spiekermann switched from management to the supervisory board at his Berlin-based company, and with less regular duties he has been occupied with new letterpress endeavors. In the fall of 2023, we began moving the first presses and type into an old red-brick building with a 25-foot ceiling in the second courtyard of Potsdamer Straße plu in Berlin-Tiergarten. The gallery has been up and running since May as P98a. It has been an eye-opener at the same time. Technology is shrinking to make room for things like programming, strategic design and writing.

As much as I like typography, this is probably a sensible direction if the school’s goal is to prepare our students for careers as graphic designers. My perception is that other design programs are following a similar trajectory. If anything, RISD held on to teaching typography longer than most. Even though typographic skills are a smaller part of a graphic designer’s toolkit, no one is using less type. As a teacher, I wonder how to incorporate typography into the curriculum we impart a deep understanding of typography to today’s graphic design students in smaller and smaller amounts of time?

There is potential to go even further, though. When a paragraph of text is viewed through the eyes of a type designer, it becomes more than just set type. That typographer can compose text that responds to the rest of the page and beyond. As a type designer, I teach typography from this point of view. I teach that typography is a collaboration between the typographer and his or her chosen typeface. This collaboration isn’t new, but I look forward to cross-media results in the future—be it digital or analog—and I look forward to cross-media results in our gallery. The printing machines may be around for another while, so we should preserve the knowledge of how to operate them. In the workshops we have been conducting with students, we like to emphasize the awareness of constraints. Those have an effect on both aesthetics and technology. Missing letters will force you to change copy, and there is no “com- mand Z.” Everything may take longer than you’re used to, but planning ahead, working with constraints, patience and stamina have become valuable assets in a complex world.

The Typographic Collaboration: Is Type Design the Future of Typographic Education? 

BY CYRUS HIGHTSMITH

I have been a student or a teacher at Rhode Island School of Design almost continuously for the last 20 years. During this time, I have watched the amount of time we spend on typographic education decrease. The type curriculum is shrinking to make room for things like programming, strategic design and writing.

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