

A Proposition for Education in Letterforms and Handwriting

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Education should provide the means to find a personal form of expression through letterforms; it should not be restricted to an established system for copying existing styles. A new starting point for creating letterforms (as well as for design in general)—based on a system of regular pattern in the widest sense—would create a system allowing the greatest freedom and flexibility. Utility and self-expression are equally important in teaching a child to write—and, at the same time, to recognize patterns and the basic rules of form and shape.

When talking about “education in letterforms,” we cannot separate this activity from other activities in the field of creative education. In my view, education means helping a human being to find a personal form of expression through letterforms. It does not mean, learning how to copy existing types. If today we find ourselves in a situation with education in letterforms, it only means that we have discovered how nonsensical it is to follow any of the numerous “how-to-do-it” systems. We are no longer sure which method or which direction is best. It is as if the environment has become polluted with type, with written shapes, and with printed letterforms. No clear line can be perceived.

When I say that none of this can be seen as a separate situation, I mean that the same critical point has been reached in most other fields of education. For example, in the field of art education: from the moment when everything was possible in art, problems arose. These problems occur in almost every art school; the possibilities are endless, and teaching is no longer accepted in the old way (the way that stands for “the man who *knows* teaches the one who does *not*

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know"). It is no longer possible to talk about "beauty" or "ugliness," or about "good taste" or "bad taste" in absolute terms. "Aesthetic" has become a term which can be interpreted in many different ways. Any shape for a utility-object is as good as any other shape, as long as it serves a certain purpose—as long as it is ergonomically satisfactory in handling. So any letterform is as good as any other letterform today, provided it serves a certain aim.

The result is that there is no longer any basic standard to which we can refer, either for shape in general, or more specifically for letterforms.

Let me concentrate on letterforms. Today we are still willing to accept that certain historic typefaces are perfect examples, mainly because these types were in accord with the time of their creation, and perfectly expressed that time. But what typeface today expresses *our* time? Is it the so-called computer-type with strange dots and thicknesses here and there? Or is it the neutral easy-to-read sanserif? Is it the standardized functional forms of handwriting with those ballpoint pens which are forced into the child's fingers?

Our present strangely unrealistic computer-type is only a fashionable short-term trend-setter that has nothing to do with computers. Sanserif receives another finishing touch every five or ten years according to fashion, and today's handwriting is the most deadly system for any touch of personality.

The only way out of this critical stage in designing and teaching is, in my view, a cellular approach to the problems. This means thinking along the lines of cellular patterns as a basic structure for design in general. Regular patterns (in the widest sense) allow the greatest freedom of forms and shapes, and at the same time bring a specific point of view which goes like a red line through every form that results from this way of conceiving design. Let crystallography serve as an excellent example from nature!

This is a new starting-point for all two- and three-dimensional design problems—for letterforms as well as for industrial design. We have to create rules for a new design method; to work in accordance with these rules will lead to results which will fit into a new invisible system. This will not force us into uniformity but will allow the greatest degree of freedom and flexibility.

At the same time, letterforms will evolve away from their existing

forms, and it will almost cease to be possible to make faithful copies of historical typefaces. (See, for example, what the Digiset, the Linotron, or any other CRT-machine which works along the lines of regular patterns is making of historical types. Take a close look through a magnifying-glass; because the pattern is so small as to be almost invisible to the naked eye, we accept these ill-shaped results!)

We really need a new way of thinking to get ourselves out of the mess we are making of the problem.

We no longer have to teach finished letterforms, but instead we have to teach the rules of regular patterns; we have to open up the fantastic world of pattern systems. This is the grammar to serve a language of our new forms and shapes. It is not a “new” way of thinking; the sign systems of the Middle Ages, as well as the earlier nineteenth-century Hokusai handbooks for the textile trade, are older examples of the same principle.

How can this direction of thinking, which is so very well suited to the design of printed letterforms, be worked out to encourage a more personal form of handwriting? In principle, each style of handwriting fits into a basic pattern; almost every teaching method for handwriting starts with a determined pattern, and from the strict limitations of this basis, one has later to develop a personal style. I think we have to invert this system. We have first to find the basic pattern which is strictly personal for each individual, so as to explore the existing creativity of the child; personality in handwriting style can then start much earlier and will develop far more harmoniously.

Different teaching systems exist today: systems that use single, double, triple, or more lines along which to write; systems that start off beginners with a flexible pen, a flat pen, or a pencil; systems that use pre-printed examples, which start with the single letter, or which start with certain letter combinations; or the most advanced system, which starts with the drawing. But all these systems have one thing in common: the result is to be more or less the same script for everybody so as to provide a consistent communication tool. This utility purpose is primary; self-expression is always secondary.

In my opinion both purposes are equally important; neither should be given preference—certainly not in this era of typewriters, dictaphones, and other tools, which serve the same purposes of communication just as well or even better. Instead of trying to teach every

child to write in the same style (with the underlying belief that this will later change automatically into a more personal style), we should help the child learn the rules of the game and develop the natural feeling for the basic patterns. For this we have to discover basic patterns from a study of the child's uncontrolled scribbling in his pre-writing period, and these will provide basic directions towards his natural feeling for rhythm. Rhythmic scribbling exercises could serve to uncover natural basic patterns.

The most important element in this pattern is the angle, or the different angles, or movements; other elements are widths and heights which can only be defined at a later stage. Having defined the principal pattern elements of each individual child, the actual teaching of writing can begin. The complete regular pattern can be used from the beginning without fear of disturbing natural free movement, because this pattern is itself a record of free muscle reflexes.

For these earliest writing exercises, we should not teach basic symbols of the alphabet in a specific traditional form, but only basic form-characteristics. These form-characteristics should be shown in such a way that the child can interpret them in his own way. A moving picture could serve this purpose, or a series of slides could show the symbol in different existing forms. The idea is not to show a specific "a" but to show the *characteristics* of the symbol "a," etc. Some of the basic patterns may, at first, look rather different from the ones we use today in teaching handwriting—especially if we take into account right- and left-handed patterns. This general approach to handwriting will be much freer and entail fewer frustrations. Its advantages will be greater sensitivity in recognizing patterns, and greater sensitivity towards the basic rules of form and shape.

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