

*is  
creativity  
in*

alphabet

# design

Hermann Zapf

*still  
wanted?*

*Current computer technology and professional attitudes about design in general and typeface design in particular are examined with reference to design ethics, visual sensibility and the marketplace.*

*Zapf answers the question posed in the title and recommends the organization of a practical reference tool, a central international typeface registry.*

Some people may wonder why they should attend an art school or university in order to become designer. Why should they fill their heads with art history and typographic terms or learn to draw nudes and other three-dimensional objects if they can get everything they need as a graphic designer by using clip art? More than 10,000 copyright-free illustrations are offered. Why train your hand if it is so easy to make money with prefabricated artwork or by pirating images and type from magazines and keeping the scanner on your desk busy. This is easy and in no time you can see your smart creation. No question about it—you have a new design. You need only to manipulate other people's work a little on your screen and sell it as your own creative work. Yet another argument is economic: the investment in clip-art manuals are only a small fraction of what you would have to invest for your university education.

This is the situation today. Perhaps these thoughts are nothing new. Everything can be done in two ways. You can earn quick money—a lot of money—by dealing in drugs which will catapult you immediately into a position from which you can drive a Rolls Royce. But this is not the right way—it will not give you the satisfaction and self-confidence that you want. If you prefer to go the way of the good people, you will find a more stoney road. In the first years, you will park in front of your small studio only an old-time Rabbit. But—no question—you will be happier about yourself at the end than the other guy who makes his quick money around the corner.

Let's enter the world of typography—of alphabet design. In the past, a lot of time was necessary to produce a single alphabet. To draw with a pointed pen or brush an ellipse for a capital O or a complicated star required many hours and much experience. Today you can make such designs in seconds. The help that electronic tools now offer is absolutely great. And what they offer! You can alter any shape quickly in all directions until it completely fits your imagination. Wonderful indeed! We save so much time today, but what are we doing with the extra time we receive day-by-day from our electronic slave, from the personal computer on our desk? You may watch baseball games or other television entertainment. That is alright. But a part of this extra bonus of time from your computer can also be used to become more professional, to expand your knowledge about the history of typefaces

by reading books, trade publications or even scholarly journals such as this one. Your goal may be to better inform yourself about the rules of legibility in letterforms, to get technical details and information or to take advantage of the full capacity for which sophisticated personal computers are developed.

Take a look at Updike's *Printing Types. Their History, Forms and Use*.<sup>1</sup> You will be astonished at how large the production of typefaces has been in the first 500 years after Gutenberg's invention. But only some of them are still in use today as good recuts or in redesigns for photocomposition. The same will happen with the inflated number of type designs available at the moment. It is fine to have such a large variety at our disposal, to have them on hand for all kinds of jobs, particularly in comparison with the days of metal type when there was a more limited selection in the typical type shop. But you will see that not many of these new type designs will survive. Only the best and most useful designs will stand up to the natural process of selection in the typographic marketplace.

The type designer has new tools in his hand besides the graver, the pen or the brush. We have in our hands an unexpected power—the personal computer. Programs help in many ways as in the automatic transformation of shapes or turning a circle by various steps into a perfect square. We can alter outlines of letters or parts of them as well as many other features. We can achieve new effects undreamed of in the past—in the years of metal type and photocomposition. The personal computer saves time, allows the designer to test letter fit in his own studio within minutes, provides for more precision in his artwork and saves on production costs. Designers can use these aspects of their electronic assistant to support creative innovation. These are the positive aspects of the digital revolution. However, you can buy programs to make out of an existing alphabet hundreds of variations which can be developed by everybody or anybody. There is nothing regulated by law to tell the user what is wrong in playing with alphabets, in playing with other people's creative property. Many of the new alphabets prepared with those programs are often designed more for the ego of the designer than for the needs of the trade. Such alphabets are prepared without any historic studies, sometimes without any knowledge of the optical laws in letterform design. While the huge market for

printed communication material will absorb everything at least initially, only good design will endure.

Some software programs are created for the manipulation of existing alphabets; to make a personal creation from the work of others. There is absolutely no creativity connected with this sort of design. When it is so easy to get a complete alphabet in a short time, we must ask ourselves, why all the designers in the past spent so much time in study and research in order to get the best possible shape for letterforms and to get the best technical solution. Take a look at the artwork of Ed Benguiat.<sup>2</sup> See how carefully he executes every small detail of a letter. Some of the new designers avoid the hard work and perhaps don't even think about what they are doing. There is nothing creative at all in this. For what is left if you make a poor copy from an authentic design—from an original alphabet—from this copy another copy and then later another. This is a process of decay. This method promotes no respect for original art in general.

Substantial designs are wanted, not bastards of already existing alphabets. There is no progress in the art of type design if one adds only a few changed characters to old forms; to cut a tail here and there or add a fancy swash. New concepts are needed by today's industry and also for future technological systems. Type faces are a tool like other industrial or product designs. These new type designs should be in the spirit of today; in the style of contemporary attitudes. We should make no concession to whimsical distortion or to the production of cheap warm-ups of old alphabets. Cosmetic retouching of existing type faces, executed by more or less incompetent computer freaks, are not wanted or needed despite their appearance everywhere. There is a lapse of ethical thinking in the design world; there is no respect for the creation of previous generations of designers. The great names from our hall of fame in type design are invoked casually to legitimize unworthy design. Time, energy and imagination should be spent on new creations.

"Everyone his own alphabet" is a big slogan now. Is there a need for this? Does the ordinary reader really see the minor differences in small sizes of manipulated type faces? Even if they are announced as new or especially fashionable? A type-face is a medium of communication—it has a serving function only—it should not call the reader's attention to its attractive

letterforms. This was the criteria for a text face in the past. But in recent years, more people than ever have gotten interested in and know something about type faces, about type designers and about typographic arrangements.

A wide field of activity has been opened up by the personal computer and by good software programs. But we have no influence upon the attitude of new designers working on this kind of design—who don't know anything, for example, about copy-right infringements. They should be motivated to work for the future rather than looking to the past for something existing to copy. Copying the past is not creative at all. I am certain that many of this new generation of type designers want to do real creative work but limitations are necessary. Freedom is not doing everything that you like; freedom requires a voluntary decision of self-discipline; with it comes a burden of responsibility. If you buy matches, you purchase at the same time a dangerous product, for it is so easy to burn your neighbor's house. Would you do this? You buy a personal computer to expand your creativity, to broaden your skill and to make better designs in a shorter time. But to use these amazing electronic tools only for the manipulation of other designers' work is not right. Fairness and creativity are called for even in the present day situation of mass communication and the concession to a lesser quality. We are losing more and more the sensibility for appropriate type design and type arrangement. This is the impression we get looking at some of the printed material produced these days. Why don't we develop a more critical eye for good proportions and for good letterforms? Here the schools are needed to provide an education in the computer design area. Our goal should not be quantity, but quality in the new designs. If we look around, there are firms which support quality. They spend a lot of time on research and development for new designs, for design tailored to help them keep a competitive edge by aiming at advanced technology for the market of the future. These companies represent positive developments in creative design work and they are against the deformation of letters; they are against the simple copies of type designs which we find so depressing.

What help can we give young type designers who want to join us in the design of authentic type faces? Let me give one concrete suggestion: except for publications about the history of alphabets

and about legibility, there is no updated source to get information about what names are still available for new typefaces. This is not only important for designers but also for computer manufacturers and laserprinter firms. Perhaps the RIT Laboratory for Typeface Studies can provide such information by means of an international register of existing typeface names. It must be an international register including names from Europe and Japan, computerized for quick reference. A small fee would be enough to cover the costs of this registration and design entries would always be updated. This would be welcomed by many people in the graphic arts. The first basic list of several thousand names can be taken from the following old publications; from the German publications *Handbuch der Schriftarten*<sup>3</sup> and *Verzeichnis der Schriftnamen*<sup>4</sup>, from the *Alphabet Thesaurus Volumes 1, 2 and 3*,<sup>5</sup> and ATypI's *Index of Typefaces*<sup>6</sup> as well as material in the St. Bride Printing Library in London. This central register in The School of Printing Management and Sciences at RIT should include only the names of faces which have been really executed and used. Not names, as in the German typefounders' register, which have been reserved for a probable use. This has blocked the use of many names in Germany for years and does not work. Establishing these criteria would help to keep the number of names down to a realistic figure and create a valuable resource. Such a register would be an enormous help in the naming of new alphabets. No organization except RIT is capable of establishing such a list for nobody has both the qualified staff and the necessary computer facilities. It would not be in a printed form as in the past, as each list was immediately outdated at its printing. Such a register would be computerized and as such it would be up-to-date with the latest information on new designs. But the register would assume no copyright or priority functions in order to avoid additional correspondence and cost. It would include of course also the names of unauthorized typefaces used by firms to get around the original names. All existing names would be registered in the files—even copies; registration would imply no judgment or evaluation.

I know from my own experience of fifty years in type design how difficult it is to find a proper name for a new design. It takes a lot of time and one is often disappointed to find at the last minute that a name has already been used. All my type designer friends have this problem of getting a pretty name for their type children.

If we want to support creativity and to encourage young people to develop new alphabet designs, then they must have a place to get information and practical help to avoid trademark infringements. In a broader sense, they need to be encouraged that an appreciation for original work exists, that there is protection for their creative property and that an ethical typographic culture is possible.

Is creativity in alphabet design still wanted? Yes!

This article is based on a presentation given at the typographic symposium titled *Letterforms: Reformation or Deformation* at the Rochester Institute of Technology, School of Printing Management and Sciences, Rochester, New York, in December 1990.

## ENDNOTES

1. Daniel Updike. 1922. *Printing Types. Their History, Forms and Use*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
2. The type designer Ed Benguiat was the twenty-second recipient of the Frederic W. Goudy Award at RIT in December, 1990.
3. Albrecht Seeman. 1926-1939. *Handbuch der Schriftarten*. Leipzig: Albrecht Seeman Verlag.
4. Franz Gerhardinger. 1961. *Verzeichnis der Schriftnamen*, third edition. Offenbach.
5. Edward Rondthaler. 1960-1971. *Alphabet Thesaurus*. Volumes 1, 2 and 3. New York: Photo-Lettering, Inc.
6. Wolfgang Hartmann. 1975. *Index of Typefaces*. Basel: Association Typographique Internationale.

## BIOGRAPHY

Hermann Zapf is an internationally known type designer as well as a calligrapher, book designer and teacher. He has written many articles about technical developments in typography. He is a prolific type designer whose typographic designs span decades of technological development.