

What's *What's*
Been *Been*
Cooking *Cooking*
in the *in the*
Type *Type*
Kitchen? *Kitchen?*

Colin Banks

A report on the ATypI conference MultiType98

With a long interest in typography,
the author critically reports on the
events of the Atypl conference
MultiType 98 in Lyons, France.

Lyons has a claim to be the world's number one kitchen for gastronomes: it also has much to offer the type taster. It has a significant history in printing and dredged up from out of the confluence of its rivers recently was some type that might as well have been distributed there by an idle apprentice in the late fifteenth century. It also has a claim to be a cradle of type design plagiarization.¹

In 1998, over five hundred years later, the *Association Typographique Internationale* set out its stall for its annual conference in architect Renzo Piano's austere but beautiful Palais des Congrès in Lyons for three days in October. It attracted members and non-members, trade and pure typo aficionados from twenty-two countries; rather less than some other recent conferences and maybe this was because it only ran a three-ring circus, unlike "Type 90" in Oxford which was a five-ring plus multi-windowed monster. Three concurrent program choices were to this conferee still a problem, usually I wanted to be in two of the places at once although a decision could be made on the language on offer.

This year for the most part we were spared the carpet bombing of traumatized letter forms masquerading as post-modernism; we were shown lessons in how lettering could inform messages, not imploded and hollow typographical trivia. This was refreshing and important for my feeling is that the tide is going out leaving multi-layers of pixilated flotsam rotting on the rocks.

We had talks from *Eric Kindel* who is trying to find better indicators in typomorphology: Not a lot of help to those in the trade but useful perhaps when guiding typographic desktop users to the best font for the job.

We had a rare opportunity to hear *Christian Paput* speak as the punchcutter from the Imprimerie Nationale where he shares responsibility for the maintenance and recreation of half a million steel punches from a historical, but living, archive that dates from the times of François I (1494-1547). *Alan Marshall*, a Scotsman at Lyons, researching at the Musée de l'Imprimerie set us thinking on how the end of each century sets up a revolutionary ripple in print and the "structural factors underlying the latest wave of typographical iconoclasm."

Pierre Bernard, who seems to have left the radical exploration of his Grapus Group behind him, has now forged an alphabet out of the pressed metal license plates of French motor cars for new signing at the Centre Pompidou. Quirky, charming and recognizably French, they do not make up into good balanced words but they do say "here were are in Paris."

Alan Kitching showed how an artist's imagination can use letterpress poster wood letters in a bold way to reanimate the printed sheet. We were also witness to an intriguing, but ultimately frustrating, interview with *Adrian Frutiger* on the occasion of his seventieth birthday in which a synthesis was sought, but not found, between his letterforms and his preoccupation with other graphic and sculptural abstract shapes. An interview can be narrowly defined as "a question that demands an answer," so Frutiger said he "prefers round things because his head is round!"

"Poetry and Typography" shone a light on Mallarmé's use of lettering and its disposition on a page to create a "new written language." Whereas the Microsoft "Sulfaen" OpenType font, as explained by Canadian *John Hudson* is there for us to use. We are told to build "multiscript" lettering.

It was left to that doyen of French typography, *René Ponot* to bring us back to Lyons. He advanced the evidence and theory that the nationally honored local printer *Louis Perrin*, designed all his mid-nineteenth century "Augustal" typefaces in one hit; not as typefaces were generally planned until today, in an evolutionary succession. The circumstantial evidence was in Lyons for all of us to admire in one of the finest collections of Roman inscriptions under one museum roof in the world. There *Marius Audin* did his research into Roman inscriptional letters and Perrin cut the type for Audin's "Antiquities of Lyon" before 1840. *Ladislav Mandel* has recently digitized these letterforms.

We had talks on generating a mature and independent French graphic design style; and were shown moves towards that direction both from French television, and authors who write, illustrate and design their own books. Maturity was not on the menu in a tale told by a lady designer of multiple orgasms on a Chinese restaurant lavatory floor and a brain hemorrhage. This she visually balanced with a resuscitated 1960's image originally by Robert Brownjohn of the word OBSESSION strung between two nipples. From then on it was further downhill, letters collapsed in a heap of pixels ("material and de material") while we were beaten on the ear drums by surprisingly clichéd noises. We had pictures from birth and the mortuary: "my real life was messy" she said. Spare a prayer for the next generation! It is one thing to reflect in art the dysfunctions of our time, but please to give social design the dignity it deserves; we should put our personal disfigurements behind us.

Gerard Unger turned in a closely researched but very humorous exposition of the hundred year retreat from the letterforms of the Didots;

these developments left the American Type Foundry justly holding the stage with “Caledonia,” “Century” and “Excelsior.”

Garth Walker from South Africa projected his rich colorful slides of stall and shop fascia lettering in Johannesburg, and the townships and the “shacklands.” He took us closest to the reality of our business “if you don’t communicate, you don’t have customers, if you don’t have customers, you don’t eat.” He reminded us that “blacks were only allowed to live in the South African cities from 1990, they set up home on the street.” All the lettering on the street therefore was very new and he felt had sprung up from nowhere. Well I suspect that the one million ethnic Indians who live in South Africa may have an explanation. They are traditionally traders from Gujarat and the Punjab and in India one can see all these iridescent letterforms and more.

We listened dutifully to another “lifelong stranger to humility” and a legend in his own mind: *Massin* who complained at being rejected for entry in a “Who’s Who?” in France. This is sad for our small world of typography, for his book *Letter and Image*, which he first published in 1970 opened up our subject to a great feast of unusual letterforms, but then how much immortality does anyone need. His mother should be secure in French history though during the liberation, the Mayor dictated what he had heard on his radio to Madame Massin, who then typed it out and distributed it around their village.

The type designs and much improved make up of the newspaper *Le Monde* then had a showing from *Jean François Porchez* who won the ATypI 1998 Charles Peignot Award for “designers under 35.”

James Mosely explained Simon Pierre Fournier’s quarrel with l’Academie Française; the setting up of his own foundry; his new types to grace “the art that preserves all arts;” a sloped roman which Mosely thinks was commissioned by Benjamin Franklin. However the Académicien *Louis Luce* cried “foul” and claimed both the italic and the ornaments were copied from him, *plus ça change...*

Matthew Carter gave us a crisp rundown on his early interests in type letterforms leading to his and *Mike Parker’s* research in the Plantin Moretus Museum, Antwerp. Plantin’s account books are there and these two scholars were able to attribute punches in this uniquely historical collection to the punch cutters named in the accounts.

Robert Grandjean (who at one time lived in Lyons and married there; died 1590) was the first to christen his typefaces: Galliard is a jog; hence “Galliard” Carter’s design (Linotype 1978). Grandjean’s ornaments, his arabesques, may have been based on Lyonesse patterns for the silk

industry. That brings us to another of Lyons great preserves: its Museum of Textiles. Carter described today's great problem in type designing as "drawing a bold letter without it looking as though it had to be dipped in chocolate."

There was much more like this and perhaps more to slant a report in another way, but this correspondent could not be in three places at once. However, I do feel a simpler, elegant and humanistic style of typography is on the horizon, leaving time and sand to cover the deconstructed computer-generated ruins of the braindead. Our craft will follow the greater utilitarian arts which confirm that "modernism" is the unfinished business of this century. Others will lead, and type designers will remember we make "bricks" not "buildings."

We had a talk about customized lettering as part of a visual identity kit. This raised a lot of monsters out of the graveyard — Frankenstein, Wolfman, rats and hardcore inspired horrors. The long shadow cast by ITC "Souvenir" ("revived" as they say in the 70's) can still chill the blood; why buy bad letter shapes when any graphic designer can achieve their own genuine badly drawn headlines.

A presentation by *Phillipe Millot*, a young French winner of the Societ of Typographical Designers premier award, showed us covers for the journal *La Semaine*, publicity for the French Radio music season, the *Association pour la promotion de la pensée Française* and cultural events initiated by the Mayor of Paris. This reminded me of how the progressive arts go hand-in-hand with left-wing politics in France: Lyons has its influential Mayor and its magnificently restyled Opera House: there is nothing provincial in provincial centers in France.

One of the most interesting themes, taken up by the *Dutchmen Erik van Blokland, Max Bruinsma and Gerard Unger* was Words on the Screen. It was variously commented that "screens are for watching not for reading...works on the screen metamorphose into images; the screen is not a preview"; "after three years of screen information, German students return to books"; "type on the screen becomes decorative images, a degraded historical artifact"; "Communication should be entertaining but not necessarily hilarious." What we read on screen is where the serious type designers are applying serious skills these days.

So considered as a forum for ideas the conference has something to offer, but the price at 700 US dollars plus fare, hotel, main meals and excursions, is a lot to pay for three days. The real reward comes socially, we meet new people, catch up on the doings of old friends and feel at ease in our own company. As one money racked student told me

at the 1997 Reading, United Kingdom conference "where else could I go up and chat with Adrian Frutiger, Jost Hochuli, Matthew Carter and Gerard Unger?" It is most disappointing that delegates are not given a list of attendees and their addresses (their "coordinates" as I overheard): failing that clearer, bigger names on badges would be a useful nod in the direction of the laser printer.

Typography in France seems to be eternally racked by schism. But Lyons as I have said, is about food. And at the invitation of local and seemingly renegade typographers (they did not go to the conference) I joined them at two of the best restaurants there. My share of the bills work out at a lot less than \$50. This is something ATypl does not seem able to match these days, at last year's conference at Reading in Britain, the food had for me the ghastly aftertaste of a bleak wartime childhood, in Lyons, the *Grande Gala* dinner again could not rise above paper tablecloths and napkins. It promised "*La Table de Rabelais*"; Rabelais must have had a terrible time of it, the canar roti (sic. as spelled in the menu, not canard roti, was it a joke?) this canard must have given its last quack some long time before and so it went on; even the drink was disagreeable. All this in an abandoned factory with serving wenches, sackbuts, bagpipes, a hurdy gurdy and long explanations from a chap in a dressing gown, woolly socks, buckled shoes, with a tea cozy on his head. This extra set us back three times as much as the best Lyons had to offer.

But we have to set against this the generosity of the corporations that subsidize the events; individuals too, *Eric Alb*, a Swiss publisher and the printing museum put together a massive and luxurious buffet lunch in honor of *Adrian Frutiger's* 70th birthday. By dint of employing a large professional staff, this was by far the smoothest ATypl conference I have been to, but that comes at a price.

What of the *Association Typographique Internationale* itself? Inaugurated in Paris in 1957 it now claims a membership of 500 from thirty-two countries, but reliable figures have been hard to come by in the past. Typography now has a high public profile and the Association is open to all interested in type. ATypl claims in its program to be "the only worldwide organization dedicated to typefaces and typography"; but this is also the business of the *International Society of Typographic Designers*, started in 1925. STD has a bigger membership and MSTD is a professional qualification worldwide.

ATypl has a publication program in place: a journal *Type* edited by *Sumner Stone* and a news sheet; in 1998 members were given two booklets. This is not to overlook the work for the Association in the past

by *Fernand Baudin*, *John Dreyfus* and *Nicolette Gray* and others who variously produced "Typographic Opportunities in the Computer Age" Prague 1970; "Dossier A-Z" Copenhagen 1973; "A Chronology 1957-1977" Frankfurt; and a substantial historical exhibition of calligraphy on tour from 1981. The Munich typophile *E. Schumaker-Gebler* worked with *Banks&Miles* in London to produce the now much sought after commentaries on type "26 Letters" in two volumes 1989 and 1992. We shall see what the future can deliver. The Charles Peignot award was recently bestowed on *Robert Slimbach* in 1994 and *Carol Twombly* in 1990.

ATypI was set up to face down the pirates who could copy with impunity and ease the fonts of established manufacturers. This copying still happens and is likely to continue into the future. This initial motivation required the big foundaries to bring designers on board where they were tolerated but ultimately frustrated (the word was that all the real decisions in ATypI were made by a cabal of industrialists). It also helped with organizations such as *UNESCO* and the *1973 Vienna Congress on Industrial Property* to have a cadet wing of graphic educationalists.

An agreement was reached to protect the copyright interests in typefaces, but sadly the ultimate and necessary ratification by the ten national signatories seems further away than ever. "Univers" will continue to be sold as "Universal" and "Optima" as "Optimum" without benefit to *Adrian Frutiger* or *Hermann Zapf* respectively. ATypI's failure on this front should be balanced against a measure of membership satisfaction with the visible core activity: the annual conferences and congress. These have been held in some fine venues: Basle, Beaune, Barcelona, Budapest and so on through the alphabet to Vienna. In 1999 we meet in the United States, in Boston; in 2000, Leipzig; 2001 Lucerne; 2002 Glasgow.²

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¹ Aldus was the first to try and protect his type designs, but there were times when no censure attended copying. I am indebted to Fernand Baudin and H.D.L. Vervliet who directed me to Lyons early succession type plagiarism. See H. Baudrier *Bibliographie Lyonnaise*, volume 12, Lyons 1896-1921, entry on Klein; and in the summary to A.F. Johnston *Type Designs* and much happy devising is to be had in Johnson's *Selected Essays*, New York, 1970/71.

² If this has whetted your appetite, membership details can be had from the ATypI secretariate: Sharon Irving, 10 Ridgeway Road, Redhill, Surrey RH1 6PH, United Kingdom. Telephone +44 1737 780150, Fax +44 1737 780160, email atypi@sharonirving.co.uk, <http://www.atypi.org>

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