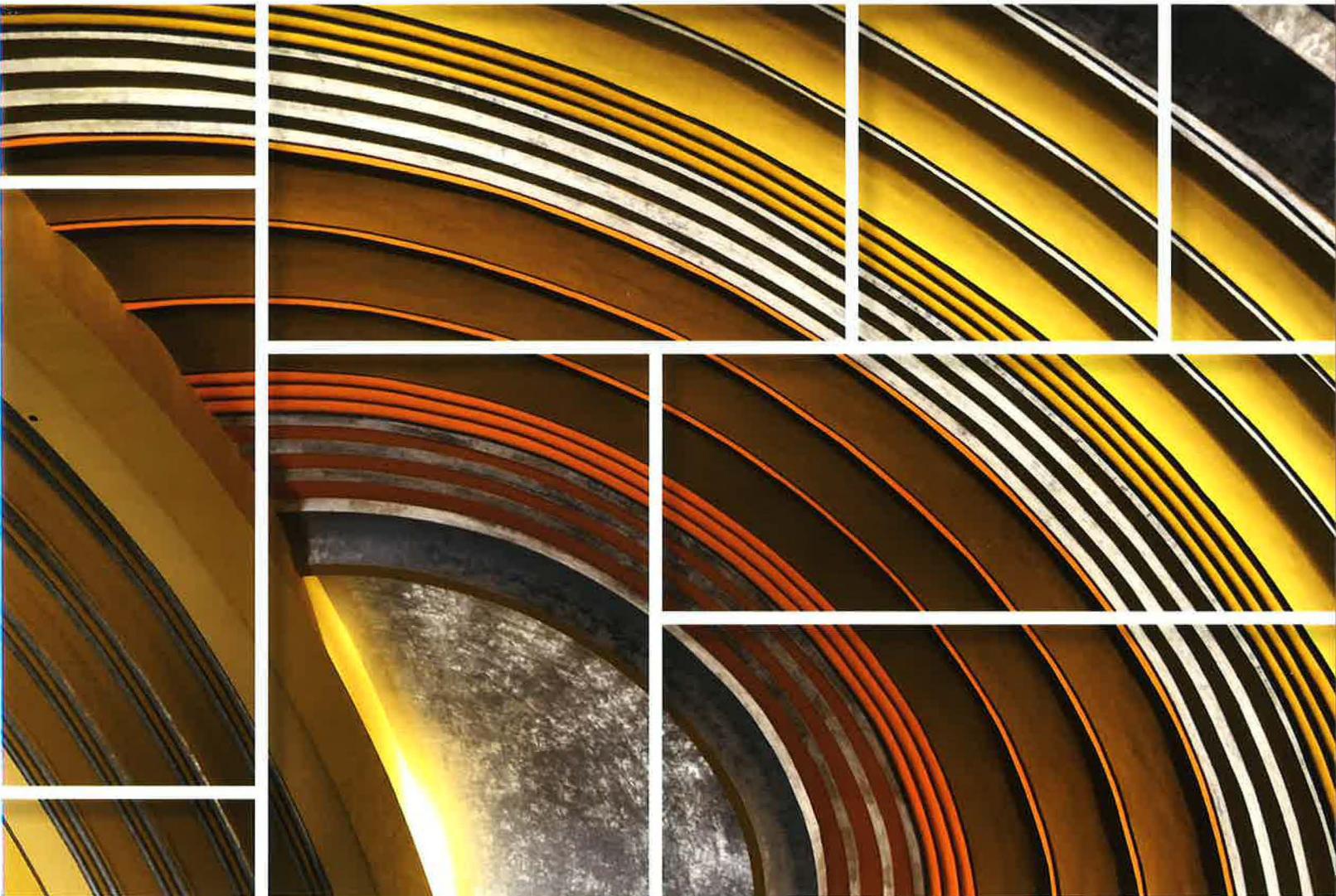




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Image (above): Kurt Schwitters. 6 Punkte bildende Vorzüge der Stopfbüchsen, Rheinütte Säurepumpen, Weise Söhne, Halle/S (*Six points create advantages for ... acid pumps, Weise Sons, Halle/Saale*) brochure, ca. 1927. Letterpress. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Jan Tschichold Collection, Gift of Philip Johnson, 925.1999. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2018 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Jan Tschichold and the New Typography: Graphic Design Between the World Wars, an exhibition currently on view at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, attempts to bring order to the plethora of material generally lumped under the term “New Typography” and popularly assumed to have emerged primarily from the Bauhaus.

The origins and organizing principles of the theory of the New Typography are difficult to isolate because of their rapid spread among individuals, through institutions, and within publications. The exhibition, curated by Bard Associate Professor of Modern European Design History Paul Stirton, emphasizes the pivotal role that Jan Tschichold played in the communication and circulation of new ideas related to avant-garde graphic design. Born in Germany, Tschichold was a practicing typographer conversant in both traditional and modernist graphic design as well as an historian and theorist of typography.

Through a collection he formed of examples of graphic work from (primarily) German, Dutch, and Russian designers, Tschichold formulated a set of rules or guidelines, published most famously in his book, *The*

Jan Tschichold and the New Typography: Graphic Design Between the World Wars

LARA ALLISON

New Typography, in 1928. Tschichold’s training in the traditional graphic arts of calligraphy made him well-equipped to gauge the radical aspects of what László Moholy-Nagy dubbed “the New Typography” in 1923.

Although it was a young Tschichold’s visit to the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition that inspired (or, in his words, “agitated”) him to explore the depth and breadth of new currents in graphic design, the Bauhaus itself plays a limited role in the Bard exhibition.

The Bauhaus, especially under the regime of its first and longest-serving director, Walter Gropius (1919-1928), excelled at absorbing and publicly expressing general trends in design as a reflection of its own institutional identity. As a school, it offered a testing ground for ideas (such as the New Typography) that spread throughout Europe. But the amount of graphic design actually produced for clients there by its two chief graphic designers, Herbert Bayer and Joost Schmidt, paled alongside that of other figures featured in the exhibition who were applying these ideas to commercial assignments—including Max Burchartz, Johannes Molzahn, Paul Schuitema, El Lissitzky, Piet Zwart, and Walter Dexel (even though these figures all had contact with the Bauhaus in various ways). Bayer’s important later career in graphic design in the United States and his continuing promotion of the ideas of the Bauhaus and the European avant-garde (which Tschichold had largely abandoned by 1935) contributed to the overestimation of the Bauhaus’ role in the development of the new graphic design.

Another important point of the exhibition is that advertising was the medium in which the ideas related to the New Typography—sans serif type, asymmetrical compositions, photomontage in place of

hand-drawn illustrations, and activation of white space—played themselves out most fully. As an essential feature of the modern condition within a capitalist society, advertising offered the context best matched to the goals of the New Typography. In the words of German graphic designer Johannes Molzahn, “Increasingly, production and sales must... demand the creation of advertising according to the principles that apply to the entire operating process: to achieve the maximum effect with the least expenditure of energy and material resources.” Or, as Hungarian avant-garde theorist Lajos Kassák put it three years later, in 1928, “The advertisement must set out to conquer the market: it must be decisive in form and content and be quick and elementary in effect.”

In 1927, German artist and typographer Kurt Schwitters formed the *Ring neue Werbergestalter* (Ring of New Advertising Designers), a nine-member organization of New Typography practitioners, including Tschichold, that set out to establish coherent usage in commercial graphics. In a 1924 pamphlet, *Werbe-beratung* (advertising information sheet), issued to promote his graphic and advertising studio, *Werbe-bau* (Advertising Construction), Ring member Max Burchartz outlined the key, functionalist elements common to advertising design and the New Typography. Good advertising in his view should lay out the facts in a clear and concise way and use modern methods of illustration such as photography and montage.

The Bard exhibition clearly confirms the New Typography’s suitability for the promotion of modern industrial products. Burchartz’s advertising brochure for Wehag, a manufacturer of door handles, coat hooks, shelving, and other metal goods, employs photography to express the beauty of modern door fittings “assembled in brass and not much

more expensive than iron!" A photomontage featuring floating fittings against a cracked egg perhaps suggests the birth of new modern industrial goods for domestic use.

The exhibition shows the many ways in which advertising became a platform to express ideas related to the New Typography. At the time, advertising was largely understood in positive terms, as a modern means to communicate clearly and to help improve the human condition. Like the industrial goods it was marketing, advertising was seen as contributing to the democratization of society. Numerous examples in the exhibition illustrate how this new type of graphic design offered an effective new language for consumers to see the beauty inherent in modern industrial products.

Burchartz's poster for *Kunst der Werbung* (Art of Advertising Art), an exhibition held in Essen, Germany in 1931, indicates the importance of advertising to the discussions surrounding the New Typography. While to contemporary eyes, the photomontage image of hands pulling puppet strings suggests advertising's manipulative tactics, designers of the 1920s and early 1930s would have more likely seen it as a positive image intended to raise consumer awareness to the new modern world of affordable industrial goods.

Although, as the exhibition indicates, Tschichold in the end retreated into book arts and the promotion of what he dubbed a "new traditionalism," the ideas he was exploring earlier went on to have a long life, evolving into new institutions and practices in America, Switzerland, and elsewhere. Largely through the efforts of figures such as the Swiss designer who co-founded the Ulm School of Design, Max Bill, Moholy-Nagy, Bayer, and others who spread the Bauhaus gospel, the New Typography came to be considered a product of the Bauhaus alone, especially within the United States.

By showing Tschichold's later work for Penguin Books London, the exhibition successfully presents his abandonment of the New Typography not as an historical failure but rather as the result of internal conflicts he had long felt over the movement's development. The exhibition wall labels also suggest the continuities found in the principles of classical design and the New Typography: orderliness, clarity, uniformity. Tschichold's and other avant-garde graphic designers' rejection of

certain visual aspects of the New Typography was no doubt also motivated by the Nazis' appropriation of the style for some of their own public relations graphics.

Tschichold also came to regard the new movement's restrictive or ideological demands as authoritarian themselves. The success of the modern advertising techniques of photomontage, asymmetrical or unbalanced layout of type and graphics, the use of primary colors, and manipulation of scale in attracting the attention of mass audiences must have troubled those designers alert to the rising use of these tactics in political graphics during the 1930s. Through advertising and propaganda, many avant-garde designers and artists came to see a connection between modern techniques of communication and the rise of mass audiences along with the diminishment of independent thinking. Tschichold's decision to return to the world of books—a communications medium far less influenced by the New Typography than advertising and one with very different design demands—is not so surprising.

In some countries that avant-garde designers (Tschichold, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Bayer, Marcel Breuer, Joseph Albers, Ladislav Sutnar, and others) emigrated to during the 1930s—especially England and the United States—the New Typography was not fully embraced. In Chicago, for example, where the New Bauhaus was founded in 1937 with Moholy-Nagy as director, a strong graphic design and typographic community was already in place. There was an openness to new ideas in graphic design, however, theory was generally driven by commercial practice and by a respect for graphic traditions such as calligraphy and illustration. Although elements of the New Typography and Constructivist design were detectable, Chicago's continued interest in hand-drawn faces and illustrations signaled a rejection of the purely mechanical and objective aspects of the European movement.

When the Society of Typographic Arts (STA) was formed in Chicago in 1926, early members met to discuss modern design movements in Europe as well as the mechanical and historical aspects of typography. But by the mid-1930s, the emphasis shifted from theory and discussion to commercial practice. In 1936, a group of freelance illustrators, typographers,

and graphic designers calling themselves the 27 Chicago Designers organized to share their services and design styles with (mostly) Midwestern corporations. They did work for Abbott Laboratories, Container Corporation of America, Ludlow Typographic Company, Sears Roebuck and Company, Walgreens, and other companies based in Chicago. While the corporations were open to experimental and modern ideas (several in fact contributed financially to the New Bauhaus), their need to differentiate themselves within the market demanded multiple styles in graphics, approaches, and typefaces rather than a functional approach. The development of many new typefaces at Ludlow—such as Ultra Modern by Douglas C. McMurtrie and the many moderne faces by Robert Hunter Middleton—departed from the uniform weights of the mechanical sans serif typefaces used by practitioners of the New Typography. Some of the typefaces favored in Chicago during this time had contrasting weights and ascribed to a more decorative sensibility.

In the context of Chicago, the design department at Container Corporation—where Europeans Bayer and Albert Kner and Americans Egbert Jacobson and John Massey held key positions—was the heir of the New Typography. The company's advertising campaigns and communications regularly used modern type design, photography, and montage. In fact Tschichold designed an ad for its *Great Ideas* campaign in the 1950s. But alongside the modern contributions by Americans influenced by the New Typography such as Alvin Lustig and Paul Rand, Bauhaus figures Walter Allner and Bayer, and the Swiss designers Max Bill, Herbert Matter and Erik Nitsche, it looks completely conventional. The type is centered, the image etched, and the color is used non-functionally as a wash over the entire page.

The campaign fittingly united books (the *Great Books of the Western World* published by Encyclopedia Britannica) and corporate advertising, and Tschichold maintains his orientation towards a classical order. The American corporation did not take sides; there was room to engage with all the earlier conversations and conversions that are outlined in the Bard exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. *Jan Tschichold and the New Typography: Graphic Design Between the World Wars* runs through July 7.