

Highlights in Letterpress

The transition from 19th-Century decorative art to functional and geometric forms

by Cees W. de Jong

A number of technological developments from 1930 to the present have brought us from letterpress to PostScript and OpenType. The world of typography has transformed, and in recent years we have witnessed breathtaking changes in the field. Contemporary designers are using typefaces of the past and present to satisfy the needs of the future.

The highlights of the years 1900 to 1930 include extremely diverse typefaces and ornaments—all in letterpress!

We see many typefaces that interpret medieval and gothic letterforms, as well as Neo-Grotesk and Fraktur typefaces, along with a great demand for decoration—borders, initials, and lines. For some designers and typographers, the alphabet was the ultimate attainment of humanity.

Peter Behrens was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, medievalism, and William Morris, one of the leading designers of the Arts and Crafts movement. In 1889, for the release of the Golden Type, a Jenson-like gothic ornamental typeface, William Morris wrote: “I began printing books with the hope of producing some which have a definite claim to beauty. At the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form of the letters.”

Peter Behrens played a vital role in the transition from 19th-Century decorative art to the functional and geometric forms of the first half of the 20th Century. His work for AEG in Germany was the first example of a coordinated corporate identity.

At the same time, in the 1920s there was another demand. Out went serifs, black letters, and capital typefaces, and in came sans serif lowercase: typography that was asymmetric, simple, and direct. A reflection of De Stijl and Bauhaus, the new, elementary typography featured basic forms: the circle, triangle, and square. This typography was noble and pure, easy on the eye. The Futura from Paul Renner was a constructive solution, equally at home in classical and modern designs, combining personal style with the abstract strength of form.

Individual preference sets the tone. Jan Tholenaar (1928–2009), who died a few months before this book was completed, amassed one of the greatest private collections of type specimen proofs. For *Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles, 1901–1938*, Tholenaar and I focused on type specimens produced in the first 30 years of the 20th Century. We present typefaces and type specimens demonstrating the highlights of letterpress and the art of printing, with designers credited by name.

This second volume follows *Type: A Visual History of Typefaces and Graphic Styles, 1628–1900*. It was a privilege to work with Jan Tholenaar and my American friend Alston W. Purvis.

If you are looking for the most ideal typeface... you will find several magnificent type specimen proofs with thousands of typefaces, all in perfect shape, in this publication. It will not be difficult to select the typeface you are looking for.