

From modernism to indy: the history of typography

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It goes without saying that Macintosh changed the graphic design world from its very roots. The same holds true for typography production. Before Macintosh's popularization, typographical work involved a compass and straightedge, and typefaces that seemed almost like instruments of measure themselves were produced. If words are a means to express everything in the universe, then the graphic designer should, naturally, meticulously construct letters, which serve to retain records of words, as if measuring the world.

However, Macintosh changed all that. Adobe Illustrator's Bezier curve allows the graphic designer to bend and twist already existing fonts, while Photoshop allows the designer to mix colors with ease simply by overlapping and shifting askew layers of color. Macs allow designers to see what a completed design, like the layered palette of Knoll's famous corporate logo from the 1960s, will look like even before the design is actually taken to the printers.

A wide range of typography experiments took place in the United States at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, as well as in West Coast surfing designs. The spirit of such experiments spread globally along with the personal computer, and the twentieth century faced a revolution in printing and typography of the same scale as that witnessed in Gutenberg's time.

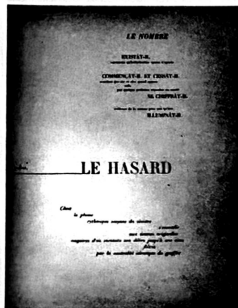
This constitutes a huge transformation that includes technological changes owing to the personal computer. However, changes in twentieth-century art and graphic design connoted that such a transformation had taken place before then. For example, late nineteenth-century poet Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, *Un coup de dé jamais n'abolira le hasard* ("A Roll of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance"), appears visually composed so that large and small typeface sizes are organized into a design employing negative space. In the 1910s, Dadaists cut letters out of newspapers and magazines, destroying the normal conception of text being less than context. The Italian Futurist Fortunato Depero conceived of typographical architecture constructed of letters and even built a full-scale model.

These events and movements took place between the 1910s and early 1920s. Before the Bauhaus developed modern design, the avant-garde movement in Western Europe — including the Russian Constructivists — had already taken an interest in and heightened their awareness of typography.

The Birth of Modern Typography

What we recognize today as the most perfected typefaces are known collectively as "Swiss typography." Naturally, Helvetica and Univers are popular fonts included in personal computer software, and few graphic designers are unfamiliar with these names.

The Bauhaus took on and continued to experiment with the modernism of Swiss typography before World War II. The Bauhaus was founded in Weimar in 1919 and moved to Dessau in 1925 before the Nazis finally shut down the school. The trends of the day influenced the Bauhaus, and education at the school became the forerunner to all aspects of modernism in the twentieth century.



Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés* ("A Roll of the Dice") was first published in 1897. Mallarmé's poem is not relevant specifically to the development of typography, so much as it is revolutionary thanks to Mallarmé's use of large and small print, his use of margins and negative space, and his use of layout to match the poem's contents. For its day, this poem was also unparalleled in terms of content.



This work reflects the "Universal" font, a new design of lowercase typeface created by Bauhaus professor Herbert Bayer in 1928. Universal became the model for the Bauhaus, which favored lowercase.

One of the characteristics of the Bauhaus's modernism is the favoring of lowercase letters in typography. The use of both capital and lowercase letters engenders inequality. Lowercase letters in sans serif typeface (which means typeface "without serif," where "serif" refers to extensions of strokes on letters, rendering all strokes of equal thickness) are able to express everything using the minimum number of letter styles. It also reduces the sense of inequality created when capital and lowercase letters are combined and promotes efficiency in typing and phototypesetting. It is a style devised by an extremely functionalist mindset.

While the typeface adopted by the Bauhaus's Dessau school was not composed solely of lowercase letters, its geometric sensibility did symbolize the directions the school took in its typographical teachings. Incidentally, the 1920s German designer Paul Renner created Futura, a font commonly used today, which seems to contain Bauhaus influences.

Strictly speaking, all that modern typography is does not comprise the Bauhaus. As mentioned above, the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century also served as a catalyst in its creation. However, the Bauhaus was responsible for giving direction to previously indistinct movements, dubbing them "modernism" and "internationalism." That is to say, the Bauhaus gave birth to the modern aesthetics, and in one sense it marked the inception of globalism that is leveling the world.

Then in 1928, talented designer Jan Tschichold schematized Western trends in Modernism in his book, *Die Neue Typographie* (*The New Typography*). This served as the textbook for modern typography thereafter.

Swiss Typography

As Nazism rose in Germany, talented artists were forced into exile or killed. Members of the Bauhaus fled to Switzerland, which maintained neutrality during World War II. Moreover, in the 1930s, in Germany and in the Soviet Union, the Nazis and Stalin began to take control over and standardize art and aesthetics, whether under the pretext of "nationalism" or "socialism." Meanwhile, in Switzerland modernists continued to thrive unmolested and develop modern design.

After the war, circumstances led to the blossoming of modern typography in Switzerland. For example, after the war Bauhaus member and designer Max Bill, who during the war was active in Switzerland, became the first director of *Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm* ("The Ulm School of Design"), which continued the aims of the Bauhaus.

Such an environment allowed the birth of the now classic typeface Helvetica. Max Meidinger, who developed Helvetica, spent several years designing it for the typeface foundry Haas. He finally completed the exquisitely refined and elegant typeface in 1957. The typeface was originally dubbed *Neue Haas Grotesk* (Gothic typefaces are referred to as "grotesk" in Germany, while in France they are called "antique"). The Haas Foundry later sold the rights to the typeface to D. Stempel AG, who changed the name to Helvetica, which is the Latin for Switzerland.

The supposed intention behind Helvetica's creation was to have a typeface that would allow translations in all four of Switzerland's official languages to appear attractively on a single page.

Adrian Frutiger designed Univers, another common Swiss typography font, in 1957. Frutiger is also known for designing the sophisticated typeface Optima. Univers went on to become the most popular typeface in the Netherlands.

Once graphic design became possible using a personal computer, Helvetica and Univers were the first fonts available as software. In other words, these two typefaces have come to typify what should be considered classic modernism.

However, let us not forget Alexey Brodovitch, who was responsible for popularizing modernism in art direction and editorial design before modern typography became a definable entity in the 1950s. In the 1930s Brodovitch became the art director of the fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*. He used bold layouts that bled into the margins, was meticulous in his selection of photographs, produced elegant typography designs, and made sophisticated use of serif and sans serif typefaces. Brodovitch's work may be considered legendary in all of these aspects.

While one would expect *Harper's* rival, *Vogue*, to act in opposition to Brodovitch's refined taste, *Vogue* instead revamped its own cover design, indicating that Brodovitch's achieved more than just the designs he produced himself.

The 1950s to 1960s were a period during which modernism became refined and notably popularized. Everyone believed in the "future" and "progress" and stopped looking back to past aesthetics. Art nouveau and art deco became completely forgotten, and anything that was "new" or "simple" was deemed beautiful.

Nostalgia and the Backlash against Functionalism

The international popularity of Swiss typography and modern design resulted in the abandonment of "past history" and "heritage," while making them symbols of functional aesthetics and capitalist wealth. However, as capitalism and functionalism became more advanced, youths rebelling against this "adult" world and commercialism began to appear.

Psychedelia colored youth culture in the latter half of the 1960s. The circumstances of the day gave birth to this movement. Said to have originated in 1964 with a hand-drawn poster for the West Coast band the Charlatans, urban culture and drug culture combined their influences to create the psychedelic movement. Later, almost all West Coast band posters became handmade.

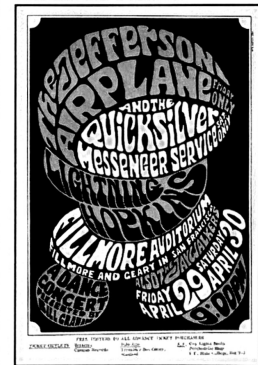
Then in 1965 the University of California held the Jugendstil and Expressionism Exhibition. After viewing a poster created around 1910 by Viennese secessionist Alfred Roller at the exhibition, designer Wes Wilson produced a poster in April 1966 composed of undulating and rounded typography that would come to symbolize psychedelia.

The Fillmore, a club operated by Bill Graham, directly reflected the West Coast's new youth culture of this era, and many psychedelic poster artists made their names creating posters for live performances at the Fillmore. There were at least thirty famous poster artists associated with the Fillmore, including Victor Moscoso, Bonnie MacLean, and Stanley "Mouse" Miller. These artists reached a pinnacle during the Summer of Love in 1967, which witnessed the design of a grand array of typography.

It is believed that during the "psychedelic era," which lasted from 1966 to 1971, approximately 550 different posters were designed and about 200,000 were printed. While this does not mean that psychedelia invaded the commercial world, which represented the most mainstream culture, typography used in ads for haute couture magazines did at least display undulating, hand-rendered forms, illustrating the actual extent of the psychedelic movement during this time.

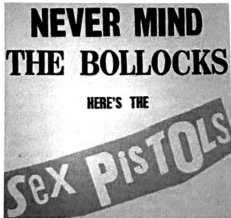
May '68 and Situationism

The era of the psychedelic revolution, which was rooted in youth-culture aesthetics and acid experimentation, was also the age of student power. The youth of the psychedelic era constituted the driving force behind the antiwar movement against involvement by the U.S. and European nations in the Vietnam War.



© Wes Wilson

Wes Wilson designed this poster for a live performance at Fillmore in April 1966. Typography of psychedelic, undulating forms became established around this time.



© Jamie Reid
 Jamie Reid produced the design for the Sex Pistols first album cover.

¹ "Otpor!" ("resistance!") was a movement organized in 1999 by university students demanding that former dictator Milošević democratize Yugoslavia. Many of these university students studied art, and the propaganda fliers and other literature distributed displayed astounding graphic design. One student devised *Otpor*'s logo of the fist, which later became recreated in CGI and developed into more intricate and advanced incarnations. *Otpor* was also responsible for creating its own humorous commercial films, such as one featuring Milošević being put into a washing machine and rinsed.

Then in Paris the revolution that became known as "May '68" occurred. Laborers and others became wrapped up in what started as a student movement, and on May 21 a massive demonstration involving several million people broke out around France, primarily in Paris. President Charles De Gaulle's conservative administration collapsed the following year as a result.

Changes occurred in socialist nations around this time as well. In 1968 the Soviet Union intervened in Czechoslovakia to crush the "liberalization" promoted by the Dubcek regime, which became known as "Prague Spring." The same year saw the widespread strikes and demonstrations in France. However, thirty years later graphic design played a prominent role in the methods used by students in Yugoslavia opposing Milošević's dictatorship to collapse his regime (cf. works appearing under the *Otpor* movement for reference)¹.

Protestors referred to as "situationists" wrote political graffiti on street corners in Paris during May '68. Malcolm McLaren, known for later producing the punk rock group the Sex Pistols, was present in Paris and interacted with the situationists. Jamie Reid, the artist responsible for the artwork on the Sex Pistols album covers, was also in France participating with McLaren. Reid later designed the historical album covers for *Never Mind the Bollocks* and *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. Reid's style of typography may possibly be considered the largest departure from Swiss typography.

The distinguishing characteristics of the Sex Pistols and punk graphism lay in a typography consisting of reassembled letters that had originally been cut out of newspapers and magazines. This approached echoed that adopted by Dadaists in the 1910s.

Punk, a movement often associated with destruction and despair, perfectly resonated with the sensibilities of Dadaist design. McLaren and Reid, who had witnessed May '68, carried home to England the spirit of this revolution and applied it to punk graphism, defining their generation. This act could be seen as more thoroughly antisocial when compared to the hippy generation, which displayed disillusionment but ultimately returned to society. This total rebelliousness may be the aspect that causes punk to still appeal to many young people, to cross generations, and to have given rise to the neo-punk movement.

New Wave and Neville Brody

Punk's heyday was short. Audiences grew bored with the monotonous three-chord songs. "Fashion punk" appeared as a commercialized version of punk fashion, allowing members of the mainstream to play tourist and sample the subculture's mode of dress. Punk became hollow. As with Dada, which evolved and became absorbed by surrealism, punk became absorbed by new wave.

The London designer Neville Brody appeared on the scene about the same time. Brody produced a variety of hand-drawn typography before computers were truly available for private use. The majority of Brody's designs consisted of independent record jackets and magazine layouts. His work during the 1980s was striking. He produced a large amount of fresh, innovative typefaces. Brody's *Industria* appeared in prominent advertisements and even became the first font software to be used on a Macintosh computer.

Brody's popularity was not limited to independent labels and London. The first collection of his works went on sale in 1988, and an exhibition of his work opened in Japan in 1990. In the same year, Brody collaborated with Jon Wozencroft to found the digital magazine *FUSE*. An array of graphic designers contributed to *FUSE*, which eventually published font software packaged on a CD-ROM. *FUSE* represented the vanguard in this respect, as well.

The most striking characteristic of design during the new wave era was that typography began to be produced and manipulated. Ian Swift, art director of London club and acid jazz magazine *Straight No Chaser*, used a stenciled style of typography, creating a new image for club jazz around 1990. Other graphic designers active in London were the group the Designers Republic and Paul White of Me Company fame. These designers were associated with house and other urban-culture-influenced musical trends.

In the mainstream world, on the other hand, Fabien Baron was performing typography experiments, such as taking gigantic letters and overlaying them with print of a different size. The majority of Baron's work was done for the fashion industry, and his designs overflowed with style. Madonna's notorious collection of nude photographs illustrates his novel approach to typography.

Innovativeness of the United States' West Coast

Most innovations in typography in the 1980s and 1990s took place in London. However, a new trend was beginning on the West Coast of the United States. Rudy VanderLans founded the magazine *Emigre* in 1984, the same year that Macintosh began sales of its first generation of personal computers. *Emigre* has enjoyed a long run and is still in publication today. From the start, Rudy VanderLans and his cofounder looked to the future of digital font.

In the early days there were difficulties in the computers' performances. However, Emigre font, which filled the large-format pages of *Emigre* magazine, was for a time indispensable to achieving a vanguard look in graphic designs. Then in the 1990s, once graphic design became truly possible using a Macintosh computer, Emigre font became the favorite of cutting-edge West Coast graphic designers. The graphics adopted by the skate culture of the time contained both conventional thrasher elements as well as experimental Emigre-style elements.

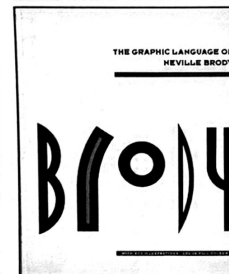
In the 1990s, while skateboarding and surfing aesthetics were combining with hip-hop graffiti to create multilayered aesthetics, Emigre came to play a central role in American design. David Carson, who was a former professional surfer and a high school social science teacher, served as the art director for the magazine *Ray Gun* from its inception. He produced exceptional, cutting-edge graphics. He would crop letters, use multilayered print, have letters touch, and manipulate the layout to the extent that the text would be rendered illegible. The aesthetics of the digital design age resided in his graphic designs.

In 1994 *Ray Gun* published a Brian Ferry interview using a font comprised entirely of symbols, rendering the interview illegible. The scandal still remains an unforgettable event in street design history.

David Carson's excessively experimental nature caused him to be replaced as art director. His work during his short engagement with *Ray Gun* was compiled into a single volume and published in 1995 under the title *The End of Print*. In 1997, a collection of his *Ray Gun* layouts were published in a book entitled *Ray Gun: Out of Control*. His use of carelessly cropped letters, lines littering the layout, layering of photographs to yield abstract images, and other experiments illustrate how much of a pioneer Carson was in 1990s graphic design.

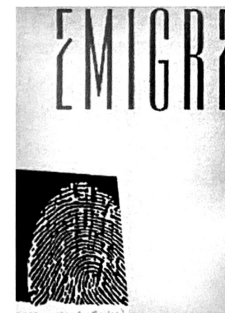
Cranbrook Academy of Art

The Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan gave rise to new experiments in graphic design and typography in the United States when renowned designer, architect, and filmmaker Charles Eames met his future wife and artist Ray Kaiser.

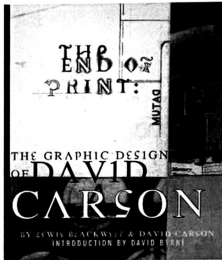


© 1988 Thames & Hudson Ltd.
(Courtesy of Thames and Hudson Ltd.)

The Graphic Language of Neville Brody, published in 1988, was the first printed collection of Neville Brody's work. It later became a best seller and influenced graphic design in the 1990s. A second collection of Brody's works, *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody 2* was released for sale in 1994.



© Emigre, Inc.
Emigre was a cutting-edge magazine responsible for heightening recognition of typography in the 1980s.



© 1995 Laurence King Publishing Ltd.
 (Courtesy of Laurence King Publishing Ltd.)
 David Carson's work of 1995, *The End of Print* is a cutting-edge collection of experiments in typography.

At the time, graphic design using computers was liberating graphic designers from phototypesetting, block-copy making, and other processes that required a craftsman's skill, giving rise toward a predilection for cleaner, crisper designs. Moreover, three-dimensional graphics first appeared and became popular. Graphic designers using computers found conditions available to them in a single stroke, not unlike being in an ultra clean room free of contamination. In other words, graphic designers no longer had to worry about excess glue smudges or errant cuts and scratches from their craft knives, and when creating three-dimensional graphics, the designers merely dedicated themselves fully to smooth renditions. The loud, unintelligible aesthetics of Dada and punk were eliminated, and all aspects of the design became contained neatly within controlled parameters.

At this point in time, repeated experimentation using a computer to create loud designs, crop letters, or overlap text, creating layers took place at Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Katherine and Michael McCoy were teaching such design concepts around this time. The husband and wife team incorporated structuralism and new French philosophical ideas into their designs. Deconstruction (a popular movement encompassing philosophy and architecture) came into vogue, and the McCoy's experimented with it by adding lines that were irrelevant to the context and cutting letters into pieces.

It would be no exaggeration to say that graphic designs making extensive use of Photoshop's layer and blur functions originated with Cranbrook's students, who hailed from all over the world, and spread internationally from there.

Starting in the mid 1990s, Amsterdam, along with London and Antwerp, Belgium, came to symbolize the forefront of graphic design. This was owing largely to Robert Nakata, a graduate from Cranbrook Academy of Art and his codesigners.

In any event, the effects of the Cranbrook Academy of Art on graphic design history and, in particular, the introduction of Macintosh-aided design, is immeasurable. The same holds true for the achievements of Katherine and Michael McCoy. If graphic design history as taught in the academies established advertising design as the standard for graphic design without referencing these experiments, it would cause a tremendous problem in the contemporary graphic design field.

Moving Away from Graffiti, Layers, and Flatism

Hip-hop graffiti drawn in the New York subways and all over the Bronx accompanied the graffiti art rage that took place in the contemporary art of the 1980s. This constituted a total departure from the graphic design taught in the academies and was thus revolutionary, because it had developed free of any academic groundwork in graphic design.

Not only did hip-hop music, which was born on the streets and featured two turntables and a mixer, give rise to breakdancing, but also its graffiti engendered a form of graphic design.

Graffiti in the 1990s became, in a certain sense, more formalized than that of the 1980s. After 2000 a new, adaptable form of graffiti began to emerge from the musical fusion of hip-hop, electronica, and other new experiments.

As graffiti artwork similar to or even more interesting than contemporary art appeared, graphic designers began to create fonts mimicking graffiti in the software arena. As expected, the ties between urban music and graphic design culture cannot be dissolved, and should be linked together forever.

In that respect, computer-assisted graphic design in the 1990s was directly linked to techno music. Starting in 1989, techno music took Europe and the rest of the world by storm. It also impacted graphic design from various fronts, and its influence on typography was significant. Numerous graphic designers began to produce techno-influenced typography. Not limited to Europe, graphic designers in Japan and Hong Kong could also be observed following this trend.

It was within this context that the British design company Tomato was founded. Tomato broke new ground using Photoshop's layer tools. The band Underworld, part of the company, serves to link its designs and dance music.

However, flatism and nondesign emerged in the late 1990s as a reaction against graphic designs brimming with multilayered experimentation as produced by David Carson, Tomato, and other designers.

This is linked to the concept of light architecture and "superflat" in the fields of architecture and the fine arts, respectively. Swiss typography became swiftly reinstated during this time. Graphic designers previously unfamiliar with Swiss typography could be heard declaring minimalism and Swiss type as their favorite styles. Magazine layouts became extremely uniform as a result. Article titles would appear in plain, crisp, smallish Helvetica typeface. Everyone sought a homogeneous, clean crispness and thought that constituted stylish.

However, fads don't last very long.

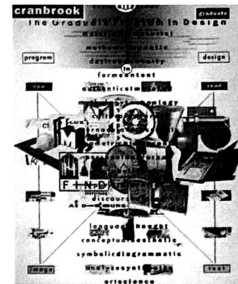
Past retro designs rooted in the 1960s (in illustration, typography, and other fields) have moved toward 1970s retro, which is now enjoying a sudden resurgence. The public and designers have been tiring of minimalism. Tastes reflected in the experimentations of innovative designers have been shifting toward neo-baroque since 2003, transforming it into today's great vogue.

If the personal computers are responsible for spreading personalized graphic design and typography on a global scale, the Internet has made up for a lack of a distribution framework.

Graphic designs are distributed on a grand scale through advertisements and major magazines. However, a computer and the Internet enable design groups incapable of mass distribution to inhabit the same world as the big players.

Computers will ensure the distribution of indy graphics in the twenty-first century.

Lastly, I would like to comment that as we put together this book, we relied heavily on the Internet to assemble the typography, icons, illustrations, and graffiti, primarily from Japan, but also from the rest of the world. Our world of graphic design, which seemed destined to be buried, began to be rescued from obscurity ever since the first Web browser, Mosaic, was developed at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) at the University of Illinois in 1993. We owe this to digital technology, and we fervently hope that this does not change in the future.



This is a piece a student attending Cranbrook Academy of Art produced in the early 1990s. The multilayered structure, borders, and letter positioning in this work, created using PhotoShop, are replete with novel experimentation.