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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 handdrawn 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 Werbegestalter (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.

Burckhardt'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
"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 modern fonts such as
Robert Hunter Middleton—departed from
the uniform weights of the mechanical sans
ersif 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 Knoll
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.