

The Museum of Modern Art

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WALL LABEL THE GRAPHIC REVOLUTION: 1915-1935

Before the first World War, graphic design was almost entirely conventionalized. Layouts were symmetrical, centered. Variety and interest were achieved by using different type faces, different sizes and weights of type (bold, italic etc.), and by employing a welter of decorative rules and borders. Illustrations and vignettes, either drawings or photographs, might accompany the printed text; but they were rarely integrated, essential parts of typographic compositions.

The one great exception to this general pattern was art nouveau graphic design. Here the pictorial dominated. Compositions were frequently asymmetrical, and type was often overwhelmed by a swirl of stylized plant forms, maidens' hair, or ocean waves. Indeed, some art nouveau poster artists abandoned type entirely in favor of eccentric but stylish hand lettering--a practice that quickly fell out of favor (but was to be revived again by the psychedelic artists of the late 1960s).

About 1915, a number of young artists reacted against the dull conformity of conventional typography on the one hand and the idiosyncracies of art nouveau design on the other. Their work heralded a revolutionary new approach to typography, which has had a profound and lasting influence on subsequent graphic design.

The rebellion was started not by advertising artists or book designers, but by poets, painters, and political activists. Its earliest manifestations were in

the typographic experiments of poets such as Apollinaire (who arranged type on a page to express a mood or evoke a scene--setting a poem about rain, for example, in vertical slanting lines of type) and, most importantly, by the polemicists of the Italian Futurist movement. The books and pamphlets of men like Marinetti were quickly passed from artist to artist all over Europe, and soon the Futurists were joined by the Dadaists, who added wit to political and aesthetic iconoclasm. The result was an explosion of type. Dada compositions were playful, irreverent, anarchistic. They were not always, however, easily intelligible.

Soon artists realized that this revolutionary chaos would have to yield to a more orderly approach to design if the new typography were going to have any wide application. Rules were made; articles, even books, written espousing the new system. A recognizable style emerged in only a few years--a style within which individual artists might express themselves differently, but within which there was a general subscription to the goal of clarity and to the use of a specific vocabulary of means. Layouts were to be asymmetrical. Type was to be sans serif. The simplest printing elements in the type case -- rules, dots, triangles, arrows -- could be relied on to give emphasis within a composition. (The miles of ornamental borders, dear to the Victorians, were left to gather dust.)

The aesthetic which permeated the new typography might be expressed differently by, say, the Russian Constructivists (who were particularly intrigued with the emotive possibilities of photography and photomontage) or the Dutch de Stijl group (who were drawn to primary colors and a spare, elegant geometry), but to a great extent it was shared by them all. Furthermore, that same aesthetic was shared by a broader community of artists, architects, craftsmen, and

designers, and was reflected in the furniture, buildings, paintings, and craft and industrial design objects that they produced.

The vitality and general high level of the new typography may be explained in large measure by the fact that during the period so many of its practitioners were outstanding artists. Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and many others went out of their artists' studios and into advertising agencies and print shops. Their magazine advertisements and brochures, book jackets and posters, were seen and widely admired by younger artists. They wrote, lectured, and taught at schools such as the Bauhaus.

As the younger generation of graphic designers matured, practicing and by now trained in the new typography, the emphasis changed. As often happens in artistic movements, early exuberance had led to a clearly defined "high" style, and this in turn gave way to a later, more mannered phase. By the early 1930s a more decorative approach to graphic design had begun to emerge. It could be seen in attenuated, elegant layouts that often left the viewer with a stronger sense of white space than of type, and in an increasingly eclectic approach to type itself.

As the flood of fascism rose that would soon engulf Europe in a second World War, many of the leading designers would leave their native countries, to work and teach in America. But even without their presence, and despite the fact that conservative designers had never abandoned their symmetrical compositions and traditional type faces, the graphic revolution had succeeded. The new typography that in 1915 had been avant garde, by 1935 was widely accepted -- even by a public that for the most part was not yet ready to tolerate modernist architecture, painting, or sculpture.