

Everybody Loves Rea Irvin

THE NEW YORKER'S FIRST ART EDITOR-
ILLUSTRATOR, CARTOONIST, MAN-ABOUT-TOWN—
HELPED MAKE A TYPEFACE,
AND THE MAGAZINE, IMMORTAL.



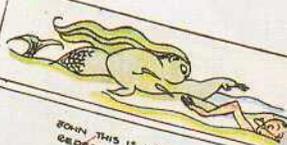
By Emily Gordon

Photographs by Brad Dickson

Irvin drew this reflective portrait of an artist in 1951, near the end of his tenure on staff at *The New Yorker*.

(136)

The Smythes Rea Irvin 1930



SONN THIS IS MISTER BULLFINCH WHO
REDECORATED THE BATHROOM FOR
ME
CLEANER

the Smythes - By REA IRVIN.

★ Sept. 12, 1936

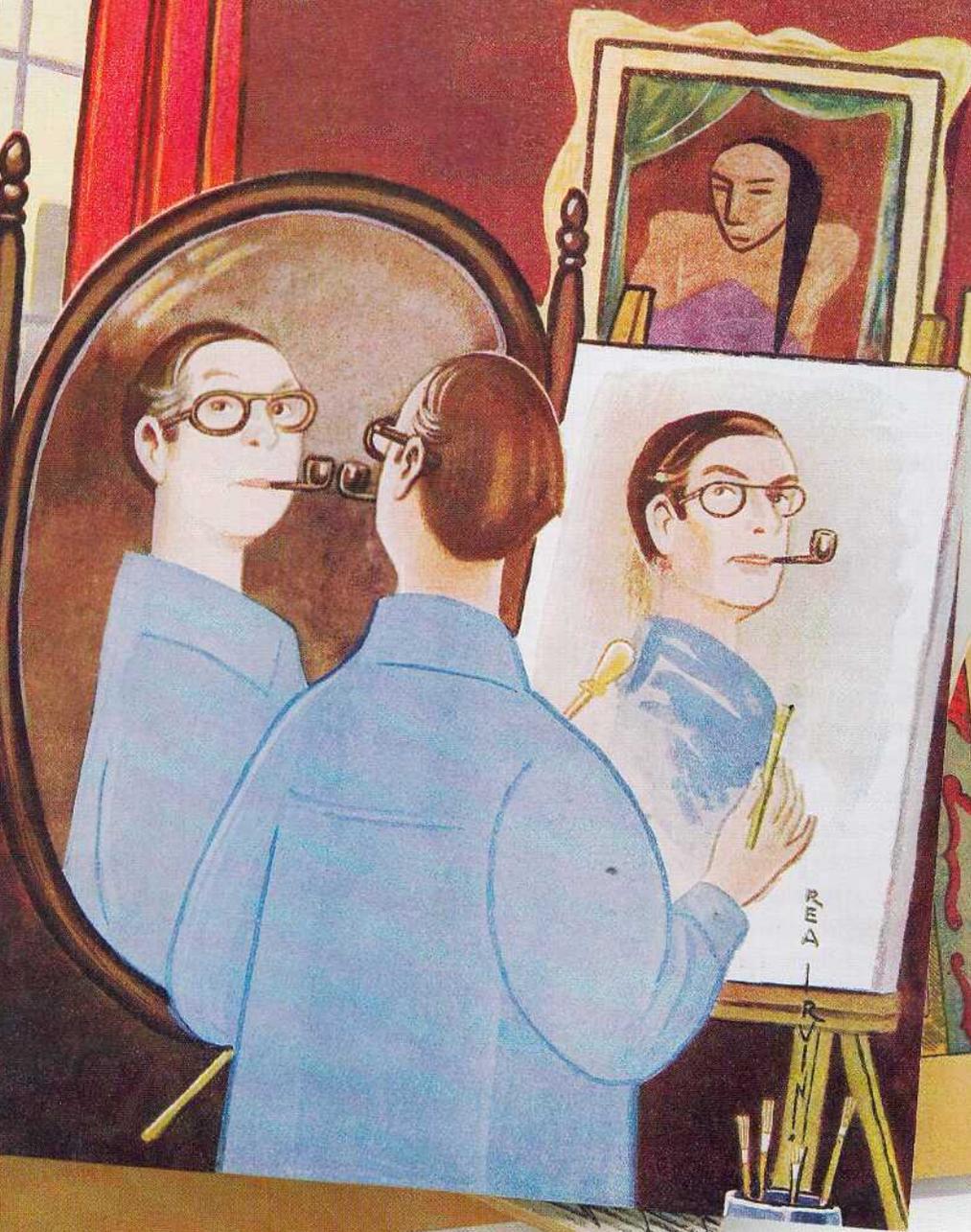
I THINK THE BATHROOM IS ADORABLE!
MISTER SMYTHE WILL GIVE YOU A CHECK

★ April 14, 1931

THE NEW YORKER

Price 20 cents

Price 15 cents



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All typefaces have personalities, but few say "dandy" as confidently as the one on the cover of *The New Yorker*. Inside, it does a modest dance as display type in black, red, or blue, and heralds the magazine's website. You don't have to be a typophile to spot that face, the DNA of a logotype that's inextricable from the publication itself. Through more than 80 years of the magazine's visual evolution and increasing seriousness of purpose—and into the digital age—the lettering remains.

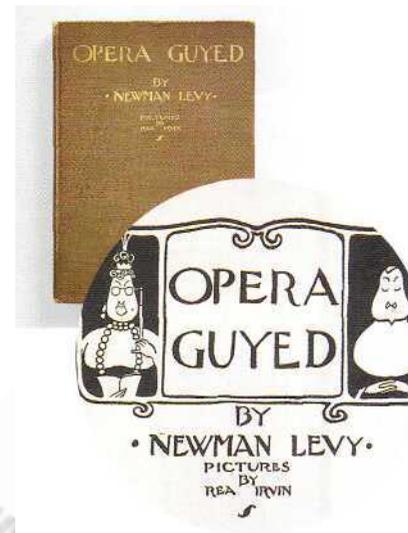
Rea Irvin, whom founding editor Harold Ross hand-picked as the magazine's "art consultant," introduced the letters now known as "Irvin type" to the magazine-reading public in 1925, along with the essential design that still graces newsstands. A truly modern bon vivant, Irvin (1881-1972) was also a keen appreciator of the century of his birth. His high regard for both the careful artistry of the past and the gleam of the modern metropolis shines from the very first issue of the magazine, for which Irvin adapted the lettering from an alphabet drawn by Allen Lewis, an American etcher and woodcutter trained in Paris.

Eighty-three years after Harold Ross launched the magazine, that typography stands strong. The magazine's current art editor, Françoise Mouly, pinpoints its necessity: "The minute you put the logo on it, it becomes a *New Yorker* cover. It's genuinely a typeface of its era, and it's also clear enough so that it can transcend that." Irvin and Ross established that formula with the very first cover, for which Irvin created "Eustace Tilley," the high-hatted critic who also presides over the Talk of the Town section and has appeared on the cover of nearly every anniversary issue since. The daring of this anachronistic mascot was a triumphant sign that '20s magazine readers were in for something as deeply formal and

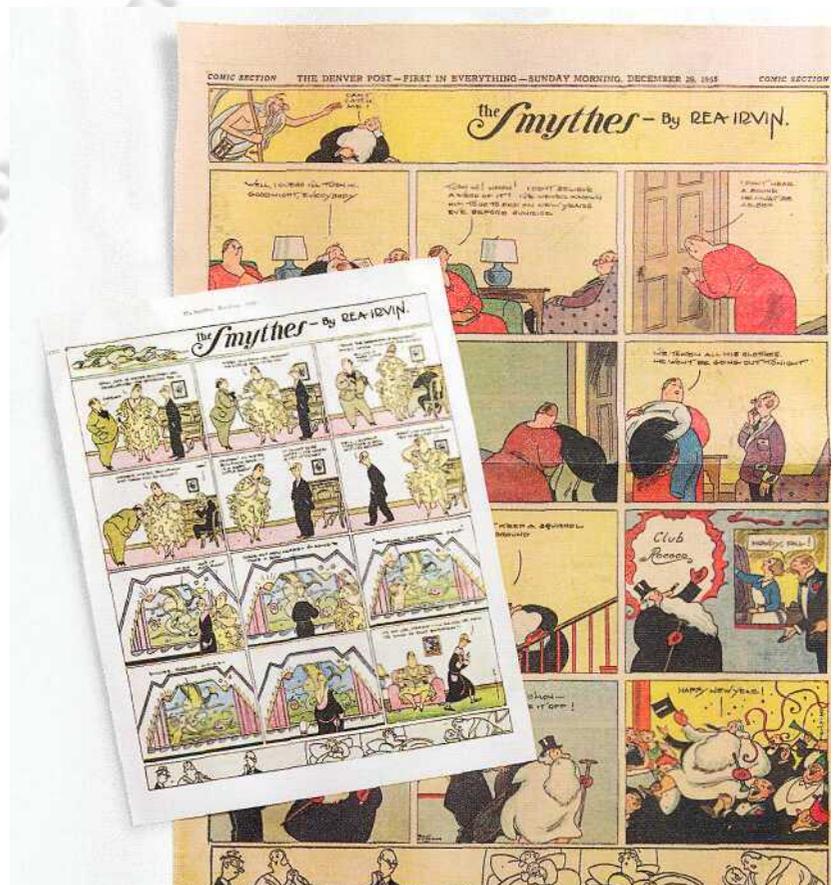
passionately unpredictable as jazz.

As de facto art director and a senior man on staff, Irvin contributed his serene wisdom and humor, as well as his connections to many of the best magazine artists of the day. As scholar Judith Yaross Lee has noted, he also helped define the "*New Yorker* cartoon" itself. Not least, Irvin drew 169 covers of his own, as well as illustrations, department headings, caricatures, and cartoons. Irvin's drawings show off his highly developed sense of narrative drama within the box of a cartoon or cover. His *New Yorker* obituary said of his drawing style that "it had the quality of Chinese calligraphy, though with a Western boldness of color."

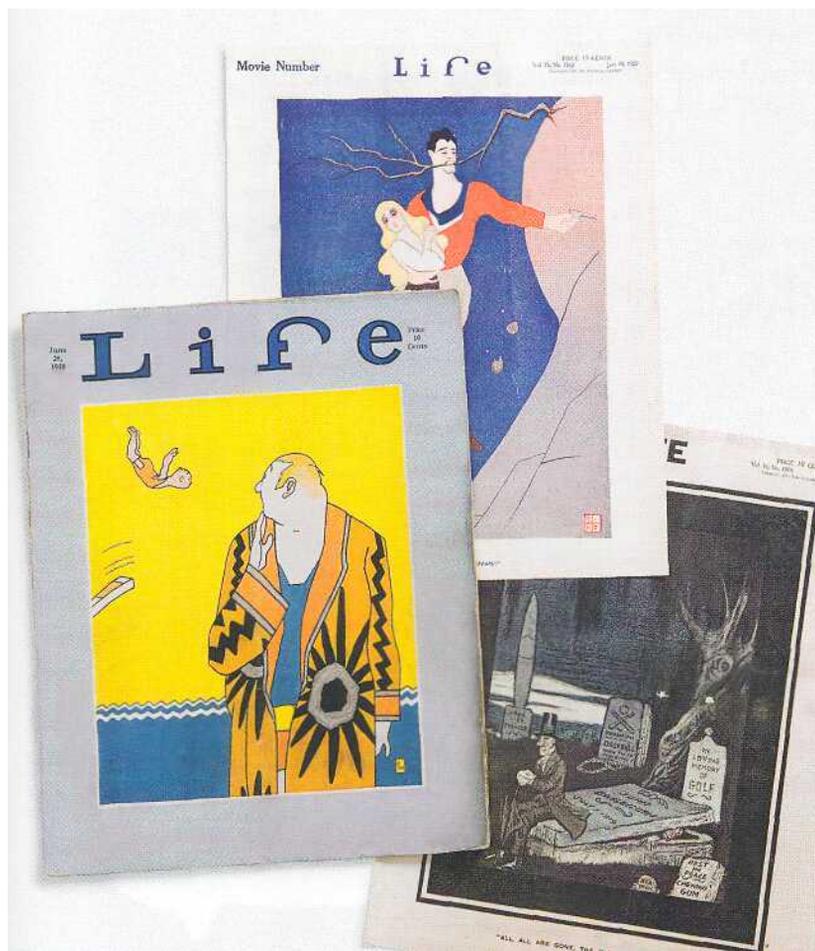
Irvin left other enduring inventions in the magazine's page design, too. His elegant wavy rules, for example, keep the text



Cover and frontispiece from a 1923 book of humorous opera poems; throughout its evolution, the type has had no lowercase, although exceptions are made for the small c in "Mc" and "Mac."

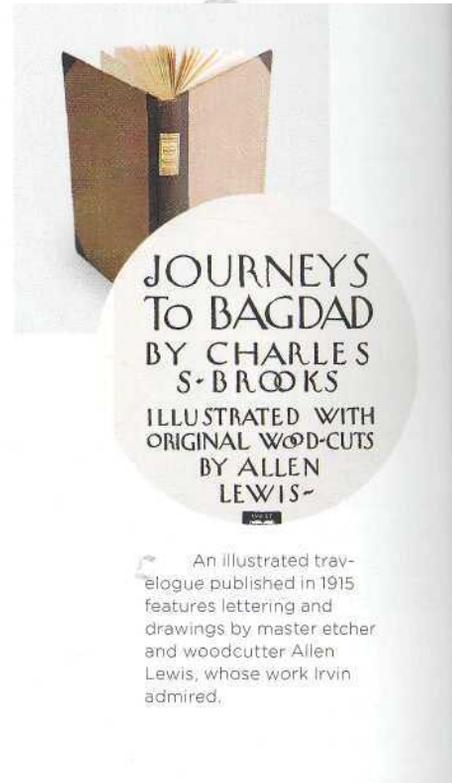


Two pages from *The Smythes*, the comic strip Irvin drew from 1930 to 1936.



Three of Irvin's *Life* covers, including the 1920 Movie Number (top) and the 1919 Gloom Number (right).

The two swimmers pictured in the 1930 cover at left strongly suggest Eustace Tilley and his butterfly; the configuration reappeared in Irvin's drawings many times over his lifetime.



An illustrated travelogue published in 1915 features lettering and drawings by master etcher and woodcutter Allen Lewis, whose work Irvin admired.

"The minute you put the logo on it, it becomes a *New Yorker* cover. It's genuinely a typeface of its era, and it's also clear enough that it can transcend that."

Frangoise Mouly

central with a flourish straight from his cartoons; the vertical "cover strap" he devised for the margin can reflect the cover's theme in subtly expressive ways.

Despite his pivotal role in defining *The New Yorker* in its earliest years, Irvin has not garnered the attention given to his editorial counterparts, and much of his life and work remain a mystery. Still, it's easy to see why Ross, who declared at the outset that the magazine would be a "reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life," sought him for the job. Ross — who, like Irvin, was known to crave both adventure and order — was a true student of contemporary magazines, and a great deal of research into publication design preceded

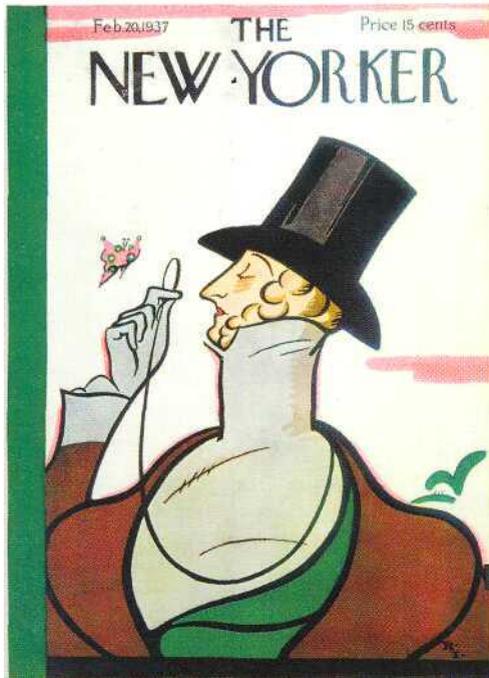
even the first mock-up.

Irvin had been art editor at *Life*, and Ross trusted his taste, which—as others have noted — in turn shaped his own. Ross biographer Dale Kramer describes his influence: "[Irvin] had a quick, accurate eye for good craftsmanship. More important, he knew what changes were necessary to make mediocre work passable and passable work better." Born in San Francisco, Irvin had worked as a newspaper illustrator, stage and screen actor, comic strip artist, and piano player before arriving at *Life*. Irvin's diversity of aesthetic experience was as essential to his invention of *The New Yorker's* visual style as Ross's vagabond generalism was to his conception of the subject matter.

Irvin's covers, which spanned from 1925 to the late '50s, ranged over a dazzling multitude of styles and set the standard for *New Yorker* covers.

1

Irvin drew Eustace Tilley at the last minute to replace a hackneyed image of theater curtains revealing the Manhattan skyline.



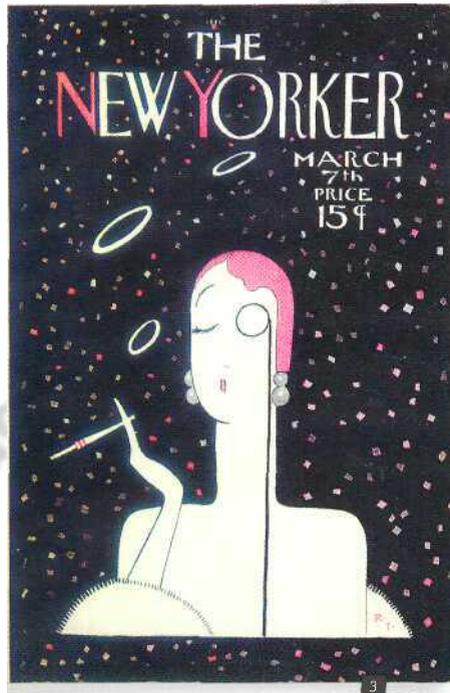
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He drew many covers during World War II. The vertical "cover strap" (here on the left-hand margin, and illustrated to reflect the theme) was one of his innovations.



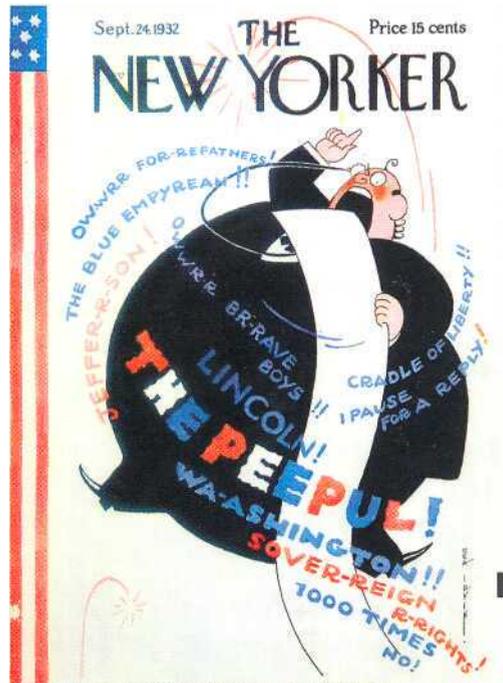
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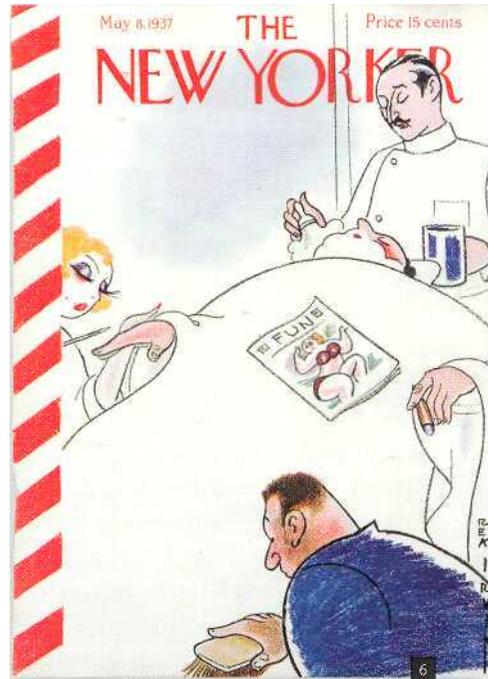
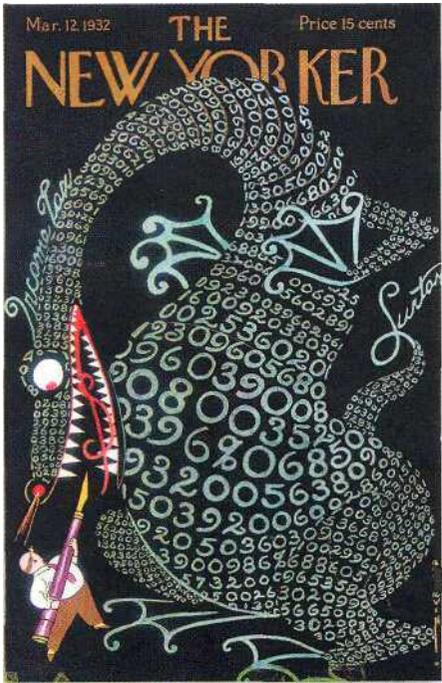
One of Irvin's forays into Art Deco shows the lightness of his visual comedy: The smoke rings end in the logotype's O.



4

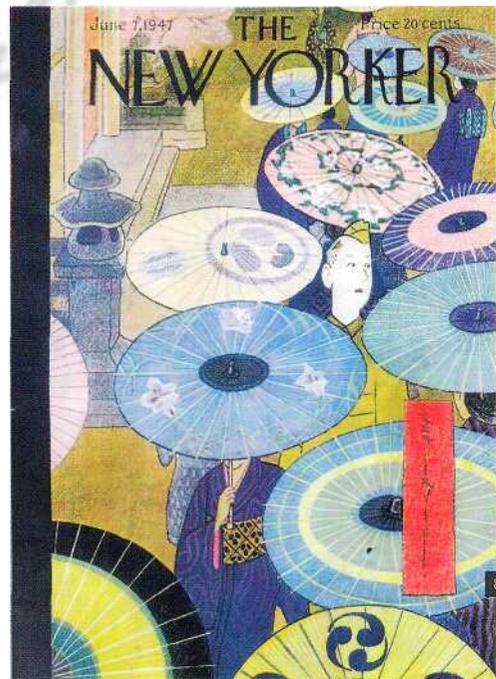
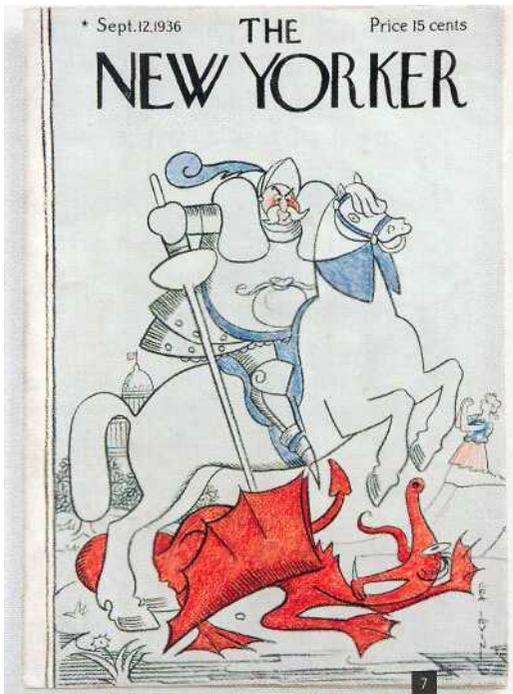
Irvin's grand swoops made even his heaviest men and women into weightless, ultramodern balloons.





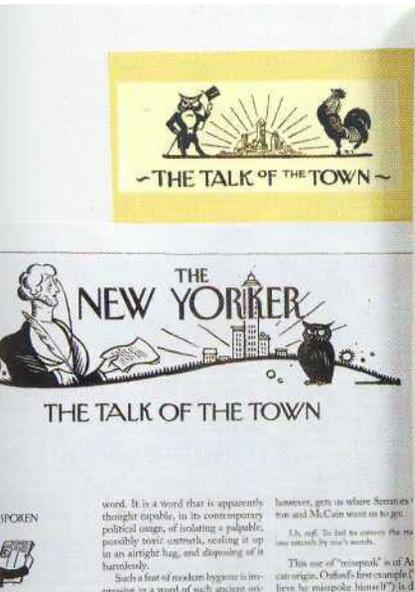
5
 Soon, the logo-type became so familiar that Irvin and his fellow cover artists could overlap and toy with it. Here, the ridge along the dragon's neck spells "Income Tax"; his tail spells "Surtax."

6
 He delighted in pushing white space as far as it would go, and in lavishing special attention on corners in which few might linger.



7
 Irvin's covers could be equally dramatic with lush or minimal detail, a full or limited palette.

Fascinated by Japanese scroll-painting styles, Irvin sometimes drew his signature in the shape of a traditional seal stamp.



There was nothing offhand about the editors' choice of lettering for the cover. (Type consultant Elmer Davis suggested Caslon for the body typeface; it turned out to be the perfect complement.) Irvin had been impressed by the lettering style he discovered in the work of Allen Lewis, years before he adapted it for *The New Yorker*. A version of it appears as early as 1923 on Irvin's cover and frontispiece for Newman Levy's *Opera Guyed*, which retells classic operas in comic verse. We may never know when Irvin first encountered Lewis's agile letters, but a 1958 memo in the New York Public Library's *New Yorker* records provides a clue that Irvin spotted them in a book published in 1915.

Irvin's diversity of aesthetic experience was as essential to his invention of *The New Yorker's* visual style as Harold Ross's vagabond generalism was to his conception of the subject matter.

Three incarnations of the Talk of the Town design, from Irvin's 1925 logo (top left), to a 1936 layout (right), to the current version.

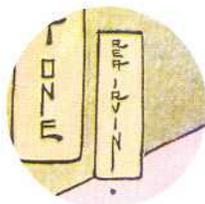
In the memo, then-*New Yorker* staffer F. S. Norman wrote: "[Irvin] said he saw Allen's pamphlet 'Journeys To Bagdad' which was drawn to simulate a woodcut, and he liked it so well he took up the question of Lewis' creating the entire alphabet but that Lewis was not interested and suggested that Irvin go ahead with it which he did. Many of the letters are quite similar to the Modern Roman capital letters done by Will Bradley as shown in the book 'Letters & Lettering' pub 1921, Frank Chonteau [sic] Brown.... Many of the letters we have [also] found on illustrations of old European tombstones & on many of the old Playbills where wood type is used."

Each chapter of Allen's travelogue begins with a more idiosyncratic, but recognizable, forebear to what eventually became *New Yorker* type. By then, Irvin had the experience to draw display type at this level — and the confidence to play with it, too. By making the face his own and placing it in an ambitiously sophisticated context, Irvin gave the old tools a modern gloss. At the same time, the typeface acts as a window to a noble past: The love and dedication that master craftsmen like Lewis gave their woodcuts, bookplates, etchings, and engravings has permanent representation on the 21st-century newsstand.

Meanwhile, Irvin's two most famous creations have had considerable adventures outside *The New Yorker's* pages. Satirical riffs



A recent example of the digitized Irvin type; note the wavy rule above the department heading. In the early days, Irvin drew many such lines until he and Ross found one they liked best.



Irvin delighted in varying his signature.

on the Eustace Tilley image flourish, from a 1957 *Mad* cover to a New Pornographers poster to a recent Flickr contest sponsored by the magazine itself. The type, for its part, isn't parodied so much as it is copied and pasted. As Ben Yagoda writes in his history of the magazine, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, "With the widespread adoption of computer typesetting in the 1980s, Irvin type, with minuscule variations, became available to any designer who wanted to suggest, however improbably, a product's upscale urbanity." He cites its appearance on, for instance, an Alice Munro book cover, and in ads for Bergdorf Goodman and the Cadillac Catera. Recent sightings include *Everybody Loves Raymond* DVDs, Sara Lee bread, *Jane* magazine web ads, and the book cover of a ribald political satire by performance artist Karen Finley.

With time, editorial successions, and new technology, the primary type shifts, too. For instance, in *The Art of The New Yorker*, former art editor Lee Lorenz writes, of a late-'70s redesign, "The Irvin alphabet that we had used for headings was redrawn (the originals were lost, and over the years the metal plates had cracked and worn).... The resulting

changes, though significant when examined closely, were never commented on by our readers, our contributors, or the press."

That seems to have been the case through most of the tweaks, cleanups, and redistributions of Irvin's work over the years. It is the triumph of a design perfectly suited to its content from the first issue, yet flexible enough to adjust with the material. Irvin's lasting touches define the spirit and the tone of the magazine and give the whole enterprise provenance and permanence. As a current style guide directs: "The *New Yorker* logo is different than just typing out the letters in the Irvin font. It should always look as originally designed, and should not be stretched, skewed or condensed in any way."

The New Yorker founders' talent and drive alone surely would have sustained the magazine for years. But it was Irvin's own intimacy with classic form and craft, and his genial willingness to share that expertise, that allowed him to create a complete device: a design, a typeface, a style, and a mood that would be instantly recognizable, and eminently effective, almost a century later.



Digital knockoffs of the famous face (including a QuadGraphics ad in a 1984 issue of *PRINT*) make for a handy shortcut for declaring good taste—or the twitting of it.