

Coming of age

David Jury

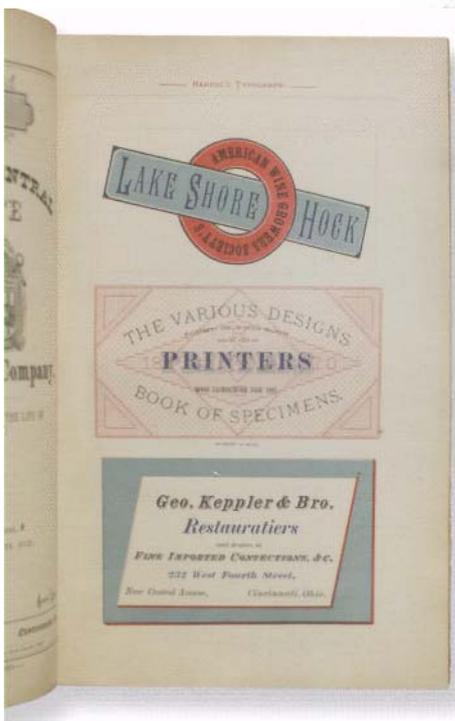
Materials and processes are specified by the typographer that ensure proper function for the duration of the product's use. Decisions concerning materials are deeply influenced by purpose. 'Fitness for purpose' was the reason William Morris experimented and agonised for so long over the making of his hand-made papers and inks for his Kelmscott Press books. Fitness was also why the futurists chose cheap, standard, papers for their early booklets. Their interest was in the present. They admired the raw immediacy of graphic design, William Morris hated it.

The act of preserving and disseminating knowledge in the early days of printing showed a remarkable commitment to the value of longevity. Paper had to be made by hand from cleaned rags and each dampened sheet was printed, one at a time, colour by colour, also by hand. Then the binder would fold and sew the printed sheets, cut (often wood) cover-boards and lace them to the sheets before preparing leather and moulding it to the covers and spine.

Despite all this, once they left the bindery, books faced a myriad of hazards. Even those which sat, undisturbed, on their shelf were in danger of drying out and cracking, or getting damp and mouldy. Insects could eat their way through everything: paper, paste, cord; nothing was immune, and pages could be reduced to paper lace.

Nevertheless, worse damage was often caused by human intervention, the most common being rebinding. This might have been done to repair a well-used, well-loved book, but far more often it was for the purpose of making a book match the rest of an esteemed collection. Fifteenth century covers and sewing would be stripped away and replaced to match, complete with family crest, a new owner's library.

Today, readers tend to be the main cause of damage. To the chagrin of librarians and second-hand book buyers, cash-strapped students have always ripped pages from books (art students are a little more discrete and generally use a scalpel). Students are also the prime suspects for margin notes, although I can vouch that 'grown-up' academics are also guilty. In the past these marginalia tended to be restrained: perhaps a mark signifying a phrase that needed further thought. Today it is not uncommon to find fluorescent marker ink running in gory ribbons through whole paragraphs of text. Librarians are not entirely innocent either, sticking adhesive labels onto spines and rubber-stamping the title-page and every colour-plate they can find. Since when has a rubber stamp ever been a deterrent for a scalpel-whelding student?



All of this is to be condemned. However, I do find natural signs of wear caused by normal use: feathered page edges, creased corners, even discreet, hand-written, erasable notes in the margins, provide a book with a warm glow: signs of use suggest a useful book. Of course, such wear can only occur if a book was, originally, designed for longevity.

The depiction of graphic design in books and journals has changed substantially even in the 20 years I have been writing about it. Despite its often initial, transient purpose, its reproduction in books is no longer exclusively concerned with its 'newness'. It has become more about the place and the moment of its making, 'the historical witness that it bears',¹ - its purpose and subsequent effects. Where a graphic object was once one of many, virtually identical units, age has provided each of those that have survived with a unique identity.

It used to be the case that in illustrated books concerned with the history of graphic design, great effort went into depicting printed matter as it appeared when new - as the designer intended it to look as it came off the press. This would often

be achieved by isolating the graphic elements entirely from the original surface, with nothing but a rule to indicate the extent of the page. Sign of age was an indiscretion, irrelevant to the design and, therefore, removed. The result was the removal of any indication of the substrate.

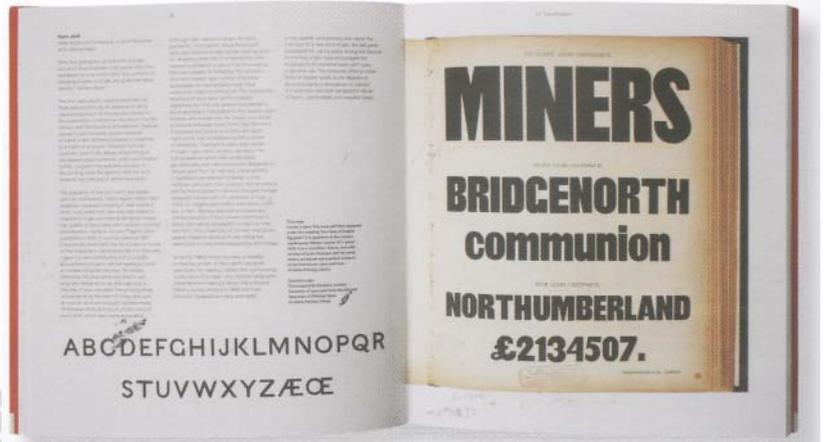
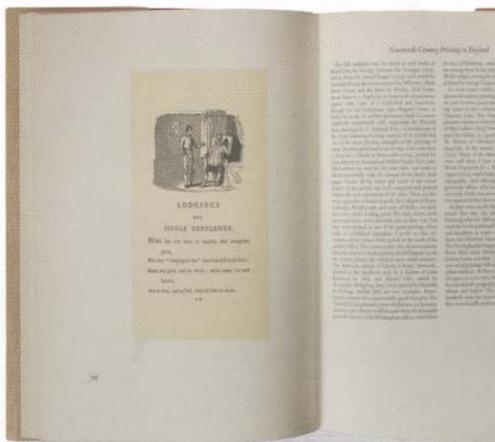
But the first thing one realises on handling older printed material (often a startling experience) is its physical presence: size and weight, touch and smell, and its uniqueness: those signs of use that effect all printed documents and reflect function and the way the owner(s) had handled it.

Today, the sophistication and subtlety of print technology allows us to display older printed material very effectively. Ironically, it has made easier to mask scuffs and tears, and yet the choice has generally been to allow these 'indiscretions' to remain on view. In so doing, the viewer sees not only graphic design on surfaces, but also the design of the whole object: the designer's specified materials and processes. Visible signs of use describe these materials perfectly.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, page 7, Penguin Books, 2008 (first published 1936).

Thanks to Clive Chizlett.

David Jury is currently writing a book for Thames and Hudson, titled *Graphic Design*.



Top left: Oscar Harpel, *Harpel's Typograph or Book of Specimens*. Printed and published by Oscar Harpel, Cincinnati, 1870. The three examples of graphic design have been printed using the same three colours, probably entirely different from the originals. The artwork Harpel obtained will almost certainly have been stereotypes (a mould taken from the original letterpress forme and made from papier-maché). Printed letterpress.

Middle left: Francis Maynell and Herbert Simon, *Fleuron Anthology*,

published by Ernest Benn Ltd. and University of Toronto Press, 1973. The extent of the illustrated image on the verso page is represented by a flat, cream colour. The illustration and textual material presented in line only (no half-tones). This book is printed by lithography, the original *Fleuron* was printed letterpress.

Middle right: David Jury, *About Face: Reviving the Rules of Typography*, designed by Vince Frost, 2002. Full-colour lithography and digital

technology enables the presentation of graphic design to be a far more detailed and truthful representation. The book illustrated on the recto page is Thorowgood & Company's *Specimen of Printing Types*, complete with a St. Bride Print Library rubber stamp at the foot of the page.

Left: *Typographica 15*, 1957, designed by Herbert Spencer. The extent of the various pages (and gutters) is indicated by a black rule. These pages printed single-colour lithography.

JURY, David. Coming of age. *Baseline*, London, n. 57, p. 48, September 2009.