

The Roots and Impact of Jan Tschichold's <i>Die neue Typographie</i>

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Triest

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Reassessing the Roots and Impact of the New Typography

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This publication originates from the research project “The Sources of Jan Tschichold’s *The New Typography*” and the ensuing international conference held at ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne (HES-SO) in April 2023. It aims to expand our knowledge on Jan Tschichold’s *Die neue Typographie* and the New Typography¹ as a movement on two fronts: the recognition of their roots in the national arts and design histories, which have often been treated as secluded scenes, and the adoption of a circular approach to Modernism; in other words, a mutual exchange, as opposed to a former rather unilateral idea of its impact. **(fig. 1)** Far from being a final step, this book calls for further investigation on a pivotal text in 20th century graphic design and the broader milieu that enabled its production.

Through this series of essays, scholars specialised in the national histories of graphic design analyse the situation of the various scenes in the years preceding the publication of *Die neue Typographie* and the impact of the same book on the respective scenes. Such “national” logic is motivated by a feature found in Tschichold’s book, which is at the origin of the research project conducted by Davide Fornari and Matthieu Cortat at ECAL on the sources of the New Typography and supported by the Strategic fund of HES-SO/University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland.

In the bibliography of his book, Tschichold adopted a multi-layered logic: he organised sources by typology (journals, special issues, books, norms) and by country (corresponding to the language of publication of the texts at his disposal). This bibliography is therefore offered as a sort of reportage of the national graphic scenes (Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Holland, Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia), of the avant-garde movements (Futurism, Suprematism, Surrealism, Dadaism), and of the disciplines that were engaged in the definition of a new modern aesthetic at that historical moment: art, architecture, photography, poetry, cinema and, obviously, graphic design.

The present publication arises from an international conference organised by ECAL on 25 April 2023 with the support of the SNSF, Swiss National Science Foundation. This allowed us to invite eight international scholars to Lausanne to share the results of their research and, from a scientific visit equally supported by the SNSF in April 2024, to conduct research on the relationships between the graphic scenes of Switzerland, France, and Belgium. Further essays were commissioned to offer as

complete a view as possible of the status quo in the years following the publication of Tschichold’s book.

¹ For the sake of clarity, we refer to Jan Tschichold’s 1928 book as *Die neue Typographie*, and the ensuing movement as New Typography.



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fig. 1 Frontispiece of Jan Tschichold, *Die neue Typographie*.
Ein Handbuch für zeitgemäss Schaffende,
Verlag des Bildungsverbandes der Deutschen
Buchdrucker, Berlin 1928 (facsimile reprint: 1987).
Photo by Niccolò Quaresima

The Historiography of *Die neue Typographie*

As Robin Kinross concisely put it in his introduction to the English edition, Jan Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie. Ein Handbuch für zeitgemäss Schaffende* (The New Typography. A Handbook for Modern Designers) is "the most detailed and best-illustrated exposition of the New Typography [and] remains unsurpassed as the best single document of and about the New Typography".² Published in Berlin in 1928, the book is a manifesto and a textbook for graphic designers, printers, typesetters and typographers with guidelines on layout, typefaces, paper sizes and the use of photography, among others. The text followed an earlier statement by Tschichold entitled "Elementare Typographie" (Elementary Typography), published in October 1925 in a special issue of the German trade magazine *Typographische Mitteilungen* (Typographical Notices).³ Both titles contributed to establishing Tschichold as the spokesman of the New Typography. With their principles for a new typography, the two publications formalised the tenets of the 20th century avant-garde in the field of graphics. The author had trained as a calligrapher and designer; unlike others proponents of Modernism, he did not stem from neighbouring fields such as arts or architecture, and therefore took up the challenge of defining a cultural role from the perspective of a professional working in the typographic atelier among lead characters, zincograph clichés, paper and ink. What characterised his writing and distinguished it from that of other leading exponents, such as László Moholy Nagy or El Lissitzky, was Tschichold's ability to formulate the new approach to visual communication through clear and detailed instruction that could be easily transposed into the daily practice by ordinary printers and typographers.

The term "New Typography" was first used by Moholy-Nagy in his text entitled "Die neue Typographie" appearing in the catalogue that accompanied the 1923 exhibition at the Bauhaus.⁴ Also known as "elementary" or "functional" typography, the New Typography is the manifestation of Modernism in the sphere of visual communication and printed matter. Its rules include the preference for sans serif typefaces and lower-case letters, asymmetrical page layout and grid, photography and photomontage over illustration, standardised paper sizes, and the active use of white and negative spaces. These principles have over time become a standard language of modern graphic design. However, the vehemence used by Tschichold to enunciate them in his book led to criticism and rethinking. Victim of its own success, it was only translated into other languages and made available to wider international audiences after the death of its author. After World War II, Tschichold gradually distanced himself from the New Typography. He condemned the rigidity of the movement from both a political-moral and a strictly typographical perspective. Equating his juvenile book to fascist political alignment, Tschichold's post-war statements fuelled a heated controversy within the graphic design community. Contemporaries, and Max Bill in particular, went head to head with Tschichold and interpreted his change of mind as a betrayal of the Modernist cause.⁵

Although challenged, criticised and questioned by design scholars, the

worn-out rhetoric of the "pioneers" of graphic design still endures, and Tschichold and his book *Die neue Typographie* have fallen into the myth-making pitfall of Modernism. Tschichold has been the subject of several monographic studies.⁶ These have focused

2 Kinross 1995: xv.

3 Tschichold 1925.

4 Purvis 2008: 40.

5 Bosshard 2012.

6 McLean 1997, Doubleday 2006, Le Coultre and Purvis 2007, Burke 2007, De Jong et al. 2008: 40, Fleischmann 2013, Jacobs and Rössler 2019, Guégan 2016.

on different aspects of his career as graphic designer, theorist and teacher during different periods of his life: his formation and early career in Germany, the move to Switzerland with the Nazis' rise to power in 1933, and his stay in the UK where he worked for Penguin Books in London. Overall, they have contributed to the inclusion of Tschichold and his work into the historiography of 20th-century graphic design.

Archival and contextualised studies have offered an antidote to a distorted view based on the pioneer rhetoric. In the aforementioned introduction to the English edition, Kinross investigated the context and unpacked the concerns of *Die neue Typographie* by exploring its origins, main themes, rhetoric, design principles and their implementation.⁷ In 2007, Christopher Burke took a major step towards a more complex understanding of Tschichold in his context.⁸ Focusing on his Modernist years, Burke reconstructed Tschichold's strategies of mediation of the principles of the New Typography, not only through books and articles, but also via a rich correspondence with colleagues across Europe.

Since the mid-2010s, an increasing number of scholars has begun to move beyond a celebratory, hagiographical approach to writing of graphic design history, focusing on professional networks, mediating channels and transnational design exchanges. They have explored the international impact of *Die neue Typographie* by looking at issues of mediation and dissemination, as well as addressing the ways in which Tschichold's ideas were incorporated into everyday mainstream practice or otherwise rejected. Studies on the reception of the New Typography are usually geographically specific. This is the case with Carlo Vinti's study on the interest raised by the New Typography in 1930s Italy, Julia Meer's book on its reception amongst the German-speaking typographic and printing scenes, and Trond Klevgaard's analysis of its domestication in Scandinavia.⁹ These scholars' contribution to the present volume adds to their previous attempts towards a critical rewriting of 20th-century graphic design history.

A closer look at primary sources has brought a critical insight into Tschichold and his work. In 2019, Paul Stirton studied and put on display at the Bard Graduate Center in New York Tschichold's collection of contemporary design ephemera.¹⁰ Three years later, in 2022, Patrick Rössler and Mirjam Brodbeck adopted a similar approach with their exhibition and publication that explored Tschichold's personal collection of small-format typographic works held at the Schule für Gestaltung in Basel.¹¹ Both exhibitions and publications employed Tschichold's private collection as a means to uncover some of the roots of *Die neue Typographie*, while illustrating his enviable network of artist-designers across interwar Europe. The printed matter assembled by Tschichold in the interwar period also demonstrated his efforts to build a rich repertoire of graphic artefacts illustrating the articulation of new ideas in visual communication to be used as source material for his writings and teaching. Jost Hochuli's investigation into Tschichold's library, transferred from the Deutsches Bucharchiv München to the Kantonsbibliothek Vadana in St. Gallen in 2006, revealed yet another aspect of his private collection.¹²

7 Kinross 1995.

8 Burke 2007: 73–82.

9 Vinti 2020, Meer 2015, Klevgaard 2020.

10 Stirton 2019.

11 Rössler and Brodbeck 2022.

12 Hochuli 2016: 28–46.

Roots and Impact: The Structure of the Book

This publication is split into two complementary volumes. *The Sources of Jan Tschichold's Die neue Typographie* offers a visual journey through the books selected and featured by Tschichold in *Die neue Typographie* as examples for typographers and printers. Almost all of these books were collected – as originals when possible, and as facsimile editions and replicas when needed – and brought together for the first time in the travelling exhibition *Unpacking Tschichold's Library*, which stopped in Switzerland, France, Italy and Belgium.¹³ The illustrated volume, which serves both as a catalogue of the exhibition and as a stand-alone reference, reproduces these books along detailed descriptions. In addition to biographical profiles of the designers whose publications were selected by Tschichold, it includes an essay by graphic and type designer Davide Tomatis discussing Aurora Grotesk, the typeface used in the original edition of *Die neue Typographie* (and which Tomatis used as a starting point to draw the typeface used in this book), as well as conversations with the type and graphic designers Matthieu Cortat, Gilles Gavillet and François Rappo.

A perfect companion to the visual reference formed by that volume, the present publication is its discursive and critically informed counterpart. Through twenty-two academic essays, it expands the narrative of the New Typography beyond the confines of Tschichold's work. These contributions widen the frame of *Die neue Typographie* by extending its temporal scope, and geographical context as well as enriching the discourse on the movement. Organised over two sections, the present volume retraces the roots and impact of Tschichold's publication.

In the first section, "Roots", Christopher Burke takes us back to the origins of the New Typography by focusing on the avant-garde movements that Tschichold recognised as influential. Paul Stirton analyses the years leading up to "Elementare Typographie" (1925), Tschichold's first substantial contribution to the New Typography. Jessica Brier then examines the less discussed aspect of images in the current, notably through the use of *Typophoto* and New Photomontage. Following these, Lada Hubatová-Vacková outlines how closely connected Czechoslovakia was to German ideas, while Matthias J.E. Horneman-Thielcke and Sofie Beier examine the Danish predecessors to the New Typography in their case study of architect and designer Knud V. Engelhardt.

The second section, "Impact", is divided into two parts. The first one maps the dissemination of the New Typography; the second discusses the reception of these ideas in European and extra-European scenes. Finally, the third part examines the aftermath – or legacy – of the New Typography. Opening the first part, "Dissemination", Sandra Bischler-Hartmann demonstrates

how Basel immediately proved to be fertile ground for Tschichold and his ideas. Sandy Jones turns our attention to London, where the graphic designer was active between 1935 and 1938 as an exhibition maker, designer and New Typography advocate. Juliet Kinchin then takes us across the Atlantic to the MoMA in New York, which fell "under the spell

13 *Déballer la bibliothèque de Tschichold*, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (BnF), Paris, 24 March – 15 April 2023; *Unpacking Tschichold's Library*, ELAC, Espace Lausannoise d'Art Contemporain, Renens, 27 April – 26 May 2023; *Togliere i libri di Tschichold dalle casse*, ISIA, Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche, Urbino, 16–20 October 2023; *Tschicholds bibliotheek uitgepakt*, Zwarte Zaal, KASK & Conservatorium, Gent, 28 March – 21 April 2024.

of Tschichold” in the 1930s. Louise Paradis continues this westward trajectory by examining the presence of the Jan and Edith Tschichold papers at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California.

In the first essay of the second part, “Reception”, Julia Meer provides an alternative story to the common narrative in which printers rejected the movement. In Germany, some were its most ardent supporters and contributed significantly to its success. Catherine de Smet moves us West, to France, to discuss the French examples included in *Die neue Typographie* and the complicated reception of Modernism in the country. We then look at Italy, where the movement only caught momentum with considerable delay, as Carlo Vinti explains, due to language barriers and prevailing traditionalism. In Belgium, Katrien Van Haute examines the alignment of Tschichold’s ideas with the scene, where they were adopted with a local twist, whereas in Scandinavia printers were more influenced by “Elementare Typographie” than by *Die neue Typographie*, as Trond Klevgaard demonstrates. In Spain, like in Belgium, the New Typography was adapted to local tastes, as Andreu Balias assesses. In neighbouring Portugal’s interpretation of the New Typography also remained fairly traditional, as Sofia Leal Rodrigues explains. Taking the Romanisation of the national script in 1930s Turkey as a case study, Emin Artun Ozguner discusses how Modernism was renegotiated in the context of nationalism. Alyona Sokolnikova offers an extensive history of the influence Tschichold’s work had on Soviet design from the 1910s until the mid-1930s, as well as the post-war revival of the New Typography. Closing the “Reception” part, Mariko Takagi illustrates that Japan was open to the New Typography, but also that the country equally influenced Tschichold.

The last part of the volume, “Aftermaths”, brings a contemporary perspective to *Die neue Typographie*. In South Korea, it was only in the 1980s that Tschichold was translated; Yongkeun Chun examines how designers responded to his ideas. Instead, Yun Wang describes Tschichold’s book’s reception in China, where it was only translated in the mid-2010s but never published. Lastly, Yevgen Anfalov discusses the KTF Yermilov grid-typeface, which he designed based on the style of *palochniy shrift* (block typeface) commonly seen in the context of the 1920s avant-garde in the USSR.

Expanding the Canon on the New Typography

With its dual focus on the roots and impact of *Die neue Typographie* and the New Typography as a movement, the present volume fosters a more complex and multifaceted understanding of Tschichold’s work. Its contribution to the history of 20th-century graphic design is twofold. On the one hand, the following chapters expand our perspective both geographically and temporally. Geographically, they contribute to a transnational reading of graphic design history, by focusing on design exchange among different local scenes, some of which have been treated as isolated and rarely acknowledged in the literature thus far. Temporally, they indirectly answer the question of what is new about the New Typography by addressing the cultural, professional and artistic lineage in which Tschichold’s book is rooted. At the same time, they also explore its long-lasting relevance showing how its appeal to new generations of graphic designers has not yet faded. On the other hand, what is to follow provides fresh insights into histories of Modernism, by challenging its artificially unified, design celebrities-centred and unidirectional narrative. The focus on local and transnational networks of design exchange, that either

promoted or contrasted *Die neue Typographie*, investigates the dissemination of Modernism as a multidirectional movement. Instead of looking at the New Typography in terms of novelty and originality, the volume contextualises Tschichold's work within contemporary discourses, and analysed his ideas on visual communication as the subject of debates among practitioners and critics involving strategies of negotiation, adaptation and resistance.

Overall, the book generates new knowledge and opens up new directions for future research. For instance, the development of Modernism in French-speaking Europe deserves a further analysis. In a similar vein, local interpretations of the New Typography offer insights for a more detailed analysis. Moreover, commonalities and differences in typeface design between different linguistic and cultural areas could prove a fertile ground for research. The relationship between avant-garde and common-or-garden printers, as evoked by Julia Meer, could benefit from examination in other geographical contexts. Certainly, gender is one of the research paths that awaits further exploration. This publication has taken some steps towards a more gendered understanding of the New Typography and the history of 20th-century graphic design in general. It has done so by identifying and acknowledging the four women mentioned in *Die neue Typographie*: the psychologist Anna Meyer Berliner,¹⁴ the art historian Louise Charlotte "Lu" Märten,¹⁵ the artist Käthe Traumann Steinitz¹⁶ and the painter, drafter and illustrator Toyen (Marie Čermínová)¹⁷. These fields of studies remain open to further analysis and reading of *Die neue Typographie* and how Tschichold's book drew on pre-existing sources and experiences, and impacted on different scenes on the short and long run.

¹⁴ Uffelman 2002.

¹⁵ Chichester and Sölch 2021: 116–135.

¹⁶ Jürgs 1999.

¹⁷ Huebner 2021.

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