

**The Private Press,
the Bauhaus, and the Beginnings
of the New Typography**
Paul Stirton

This essay looks at the years leading up to “Elementare Typographie”, the special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen* from October 1925, which was Jan Tschichold's first substantial contribution to the new approach to design for print. What I am aiming to do is sketch in some of the tendencies that were open to a young typographer embarking on his career in the early 1920s, especially one with an ambition to make this discipline meaningful beyond the simple expression of its craft skills.

In 1922, before he had completed his studies at the Staatliche Akademie für graphische Künste und Buchgewerbe (State Academy for Graphic Arts and Book Production) in Leipzig, the young Jan Tschichold made a trip to Offenbach, near Frankfurt, to meet the celebrated calligrapher and type designer Rudolf Koch. This may have been prompted by an exhibition of Koch's work in Leipzig that year, but Koch was already the presiding genius of German *Schriftkunst* (lettering art) and well-known for his Blackletter typefaces, especially Deutsche Schrift of 1910 and Frühling (1914), two lively and expressive typefaces that preserved the essential character of the late mediaeval and more recent Gothic faces.¹ This reflected Koch's belief in the relevance of historic German script, not merely as repositories of German history and culture, but as a repertoire of letterforms that could be used in different contexts, leaving room for imaginative expression. For Koch, therefore, and for many of his followers, Gothic script was not a reactionary form or merely revivalism. Instead, it offered potential for creative design linking the historic and the modern in an essentially Germanic context. This was not unusual in the late Wilhelmine culture of pre-war Germany. Wilhelm Worringer had published *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Form Problems of the Gothic) in 1912, a pointed exposition of certain ideas that had appeared in his *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and Empathy) of 1907–8. Furthermore, these ideas were still current after the war, a time which saw the reassertion of Expressionism among progressive circles, especially in the mediums of film, painting and printmaking.²

In fact, Tschichold made two trips to meet Koch before deciding that the older man's approach to lettering and type was too nationalistic and historicist to engage with the complex issues of modern life.³ This has been regarded as a sign of Tschichold's development from a traditional craft out-

look towards the full-blown Modernist principles of the New Typography that would appear over the next few years. Indeed, I wrote as such in my book.⁴ However, that seems a bit too glib and deterministic. Instead, I want

1 For information on Koch in English, see Cinnamon 2000.
2 Worringer 1912.
3 Jan Tschichold 1924–1944, unpublished typescript, quoted in Burke 2007: 19.
4 Stirton 2019: 21.

to consider the range of styles and practices open to a young typographer in the 1920s, and how these options might be regarded in relation to loaded concepts like “progressive” and “modern”.

In 1922–23, Tschichold was still producing work, albeit trial pieces or personal exercises, in the manner of Koch. His sketchbooks of the period, in the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Leipzig, include examples of calligraphy in Koch’s Gothic and modern manner; Tschichold even designed a bookplate for Koch.⁵ It is often repeated that Tschichold’s change of direction was prompted by a visit to the Bauhaus in the summer of 1923, when the famous *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar 1919–1923* exhibition was held. This was soon after László Moholy-Nagy had been appointed to the teaching staff. In fact, the exhibition opened less than three months after Moholy’s arrival in Weimar. One of his first tasks must have been to prepare the catalogue of the exhibition, which he did in a new format, employing asymmetrical text in blocks, setting titles at different orientations, and employing sans serif type. (**fig. 14**) Despite this bold assertion of a new typographic style, one might ask what it was that so impressed Tschichold at that time. After all, the Bauhaus taught little or no typography or even setting of type. The *Druckerei* or print workshop, led by Lyonel Feininger and Walther Klemm, was mostly employed in producing artists’ prints by prominent avant-garde painters. By a stroke of good fortune, Walter Gropius discovered that the college had a large stock of handmade papers that were ideal for producing limited edition prints, in relief, intaglio and lithography. Seeing the potential to raise funds for the college, Gropius initiated a project known as “Neue Europäische Graphik” (New European Graphics), folios of artists’ prints to be sold both directly from the Bauhaus and through print dealers in Germany and beyond.⁶ Alongside its financial potential, this was an excellent move for the college’s reputation, placing the Bauhaus at the centre of an international network of progressive modern artists.

But it could hardly conceal the internal problems, especially in the print workshop. It is apparent from first-hand reports that there was little or no continuity in the teaching in the *Druckerei*. The bookbinder Otto Dorfner had kept the print workshop going independently during the war, and in 1919 his private workshop was incorporated into the Bauhaus. Dorfner was a good craftsman, but he was quite traditional in outlook, and he clashed with the form masters, especially Paul Klee and Lothar Schreyer, before leaving in 1922.⁷ This should be seen against the backdrop of quite intense criticism of the Bauhaus among some avant-garde circles. During 1921–22, Theo van Doesburg was resident in Weimar, attracting a number of students opposed to the Expressionist ethos of Itten, Feininger and others on the Bauhaus staff, and he followed this up with articles dismissing the current Bauhaus ethos.⁸ He

was not alone. Vilmos Huszár wrote an excoriating article in *De Stijl* in 1922, attacking the “inconsistency, arbitrariness and self-indulgence of the masters and students”, to which Feininger wrote an equally vitriolic reply attacking Van Doesburg.⁹ This might sound like personal animosity, but it was a pre-

5 Tschichold’s early designs, collected in three albums, have been digitised by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Leipzig.

6 In all, five folios were planned and four were completed between 1921 and 1923. For information on this and the Bauhaus *Druckerei* in Weimar, see Krischke 2019.

7 Dora Wibiral had been employed briefly in 1919 to teach type design, and Lothar Schreyer taught a course on Typeface Theory in 1920–1921.

8 Van Doesburg 1925: 363–366, translated in Van Doesburg 1990: 71.

9 Huszár 1922: 136.



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DRUCKEREI

Abb. 93. Die Werkstatt

Formmeister: L. FEININGER

Technischer Meister: K. ZAUBITZER

1923

ude to the simmering debate between Expressionists and the proponents of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) that would come to a head in the mid-1920s, and in which Tschichold himself would play a part.

Returning to Tschichold's visit to Weimar, one wonders what he must have thought of the presses and technical equipment in the *Druckerei*, quite apart from whatever he made of the masters. As is clear from the photograph in the 1923 catalogue, there were only three presses: an etching press, a litho press, and a 19th-century Washington-style handpress, of a type commonly used for proofing, not finished printing on any scale. Tschichold was just completing his studies at the State Academy in Leipzig, one of the principal trade and craft schools in the entire country, which had extensive modern printing equipment and technical staff to supervise the students as well as introduce them to new printing technologies.

This state of affairs was hardly the fault of the Bauhaus. In fact, the college authorities were caught in a dilemma that severely restricted their ability to teach printing to any professional level. When the college was created in 1919, this involved the amalgamation of two earlier colleges, one of fine arts and the other of applied art. The latter, the *Großherzoglich-Sächsisches Kunstgewerbeschule* (Grand-Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Craft), had previously been directed by Henry van de Velde, one of the leaders of design reform in pre-war Germany, and a designer who had himself come through book and lettering design before moving into interior design and architecture. Van de Velde oversaw a lively print and book design department in the college. However, there are conflicting reports of what happened to this. Joost Schmidt, the last person to teach advertising design in the Bauhaus, reported that the presses under Van de Velde's jurisdiction were confiscated by the state, probably in 1915, when Van de Velde, a Belgian national, was interned and later deported as an enemy alien.¹⁰ That may explain why printing or typography did not appear in the Bauhaus curriculum diagram.

There is, however, an alternative story behind this. Van de Velde was originally invited to Weimar in 1903 at the behest of Harry Graf Kessler, a cultural advisor to the Grand Duke, to lead the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts) as part of a campaign to make the city of Weimar a centre for progressive culture inspired by the teachings of Nietzsche. Despite his nickname of the "red duke", Kessler harboured a dislike of Walter Gropius, both personally and ideologically, at one point referring to the Bauhaus in his diary as "a host of Bolsheviks and Jews".¹¹ It is not clear how this arose, but Kessler seems to have withheld the main presses taken from the old college, which may explain the paucity of printing equipment at the Bauhaus and the absence of any practical instruction in the field of print. In fact, teaching of the cluster of subjects that we would describe nowadays as "graphic design" did not commence until 1926 at Dessau, and was only ever a minor part of the curriculum.

Kessler had another reason to requisition the presses at the *Kunstgewerbeschule*. In 1913 he and Van de Velde had set up the Cranach Press in Weimar to produce finely printed and imaginatively designed books in limited editions, very much along the lines of the English private presses.¹²

Kessler had visited William Morris in the 1890s, when Morris was most pre-occupied with the Kelmscott Press. However, the model for Cranach was the Doves Press, set up in Hammer-

¹⁰ Loew and Nonne-Schmidt 1984: 19.

¹¹ Kessler 2007: 268.

¹² See Schröder 1968.

smith in 1900 by Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker, each of whom had been close to William Morris.¹³ The Doves Press was distinguished by the quality of its materials and presswork, but, unlike Morris's Kelmscott Press, it was intended to be "modern", as seen in their austere layouts, plain calligraphic capitals and the "Doves Roman" typeface, which departed from the more decorative faces adopted by many in the private press movement. The Doves Press lasted only a few years, closing in 1909 amid a bitter dispute between the two founders, but it laid the groundwork for many private presses, not least the Cranach. **(fig. 15)**

In re-launching the press after the war, Kessler and Van de Velde sought the advice of the Doves Press circle, in particular, Emery Walker, Edward Johnston and Eric Gill. This was, for Kessler, a personal project, but it was also one committed to an ideal of cosmopolitanism and modernity, in defiance of the introverted nationalism that dominated post-war Germany. The first book to be published by the press was *The Eclogues of Virgil* (1926) using type designed by Kessler himself, cut by Walker, with capitals by Eric Gill, and illustrations in woodcut by the French sculptor Aristide Maillol. More significantly, however, the second book from the press was an attempt to integrate the most advanced ideas about stage design and dramaturgy with the ideals of fine printing. This was the Cranach Hamlet, completed initially in German in 1928, employing the stage design principles and woodcuts of Edward Gordon Craig.¹⁴ **(fig. 16)**

Craig is not well known outside of the field of drama, so it may be worth recounting something of his work for the Cranach Press. Growing up in a theatrical family, Craig had a colourful life, but he remains best known for the innovative stage productions of Shakespeare, which he mounted in the Moscow Art Theatre at the invitation of Konstantin Stanislavsky. Craig had a modest reputation in Britain as a printmaker, but it was an adaptation of his dramaturgy that led to the book. Noticing how he used small figures cut from plank wood in a "toy theatre", it was suggested that these figurines could be used to print from directly. The initial trials worked well, so Craig's drawings and figurines were handed over to a specialist engraver to prepare blocks for full printing. Craig had already put forward the view that the true creator in the theatre is not the playwright or actors, but the director; only he can organise and balance the elements of the staging, the sets and costumes, the lighting, the emphases of the text, the movement and interaction of the players, using "action, words, line, colour and rhythm".¹⁵ Craig did not like excessive action, preferring to move figures and groups around the stage like participants in a masque. Instead, he relied upon light and texture, mostly communicated by bare props creating an abstracted setting within which the action unfolded. This was the effect that he and Kessler sought to translate into a book; not just the text with illustrations, but a visual, readable, and tactile equivalent to the experience of the drama.

So, in the Bauhaus and the Cranach Press, we have two different forms of modern design existing just a few hundred metres apart in a small town in Thuringia. Until 1923, Tschichold was on the fringes of these contrasted ap-

proaches to design for print. His early sketchbooks show a diverse range of styles and practices. Not only was he an accomplished calligrapher in both the Gothic manner and in the

¹³ On the movement in general, see Franklin 1991.

¹⁴ Shakespeare 1928. For a detailed account of the planning and execution of the Cranach *Hamlet*, see Newman 1995.

¹⁵ Craig 1911.



fig. 15 Page from *The English Bible*, The Doves Press, London 1903–1905, typography by Emery Walker and calligraphic capital by Edward Johnston.



fig. 16 Double page spread from
Hamlet – *Die Tragische
Geschichte von Hamlet Prinzen
von Dänemark* (The Tragedy
of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark),
Cranach Presse, Weimar 1928
– with woodcut illustrations by
Edward Gordon Craig.

more expressive style that Koch himself was developing in the years after the war. But Tschichold was also on the fringes of the private press movement and the general design reform movement for higher standards of fine printing. In 1919, he began providing calligraphy for Karl Schnabel's Palatino series of poetry books.¹⁶ Tschichold also became a *Meisterschüler* (master student) at the academy under Walter Tiemann, the director. At this time, Tschichold also began volunteering at the printing house Poeschel & Trepte, whose director Carl Ernst Poeschel was an admirer of the English private press movement. More significantly, however, in 1907 Poeschel collaborated with Walter Tiemann in founding the Janus Press in Leipzig, the first of the private presses in Germany, which was run from the offices of Poeschel & Trepte. Like the Cranach Press, Janus-Press books were directly inspired by the values of the Doves Press; simple page layouts, high quality types, ink, paper, and bindings. While the private press movement is often regarded as a British phenomenon, the special status of typography and *Schriftkunst* in Germany in the early 20th century meant that the movement was taken up there enthusiastically. The Janus Presse may have been the first, but it was soon followed by other presses, many of which were represented at the *Internationale Ausstellung für Buchgewerbe und Graphik*, or BUGRA (International Exhibition of Books and Graphic Arts) in Leipzig in 1914, which Tschichold had attended and is sometimes credited with inspiring him to take up typography. While there was a virtue in essential typographic qualities at these presses, it would be wrong to regard them solely as exponents of conventional, even reactionary, aesthetics. Poeschel & Trepte produced work for avant-garde artists and writers, including Wassily Kandinsky and Oskar Kokoschka.¹⁷

But while the worlds of fine printing and avant-garde culture in Germany were "entangled", there were clearly different camps and mutually hostile tendencies. This is what makes Tschichold's activities in the two years between 1923 and 1925, in fact the eighteen months or so between his visit to the Bauhaus and the preparation of "Elementare Typographie", so consequential for the history of typography, and graphic design.

It is clear from the early manifesto in the journal *Kulturschau* that Tschichold's ideas were already quite well formed by the spring of 1925. Entitled *Die neue Typographie*, it includes many of the key concepts that will be repeated by Tschichold and others over the next few years: text and layout should be brief, precise and purposeful; design should be relevant to most forms of printed matter, employing the most suitable materials (*konstruktive*, or constructive), and rejecting all ornament; of course, it should employ exclusively sans serif types (no "national typefaces" such as Fraktur and the likes).¹⁸ This initial statement also had the more radical proposals of diagonal line directions for animation, and photography for illustration. That Tschichold equated these

rules with Constructivism is also clear from the images by El Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy and the captions that he used to illustrate the article.

This is remarkably early to be proposing such a comprehensive programme of reform of typography and

16 Two titles are known to have been printed in litho from Tschichold's calligraphy: Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hymne an die Freiheit*, and Friedrich Schiller, *An die Freude*, both published by Karl Schnabel, Berlin 1919.

17 Wassily Kandinsky's *Klänge* (Sounds), R. Piper & Co, Munich 1913, and Oskar Kokoschka's *Die Chinesische Mauer* (The Great Wall of China), Kurt Wolff Verlag, Leipzig 1914, were printed by Poeschel & Trepte.

18 Tschichold 1925: 9–11.

graphic communication. Constructivism, as a term, was relatively new and still unclear in the minds of many, but Tschichold had already grasped its relationship with objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*), industrial materials and processes, and radical socialist politics. El Lissitzky, the key figure in transmitting this material to the West, had himself undergone a dramatic conversion in late 1919, when coming under the influence of Malevich at the VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Artistic and Technical Studios) in Vitebsk.¹⁹ Moholy-Nagy had been introduced to recent Russian theories of art in 1920, and only encountered El Lissitzky himself in late 1921 or early 1922.²⁰ Just three years earlier, Moholy was serving in the Hungarian army having suspended his law studies, and the extent of his artwork was mostly coloured drawings of relatively conventional subjects. Moholy was an immediate convert to Constructivism and a quick learner, if the *Buch neuer Künstler* (The Book of New Artists) is anything to go by.²¹ It seems likely that Tschichold became aware of recent Russian art and theory around the series of exhibitions and events that were held in Germany in 1922, at just the moment when he was turning away from the examples of Koch and the “national” school of *Schriftkunst*. 1922 was the year of two exhibitions of Russian art in Germany, and two congresses of Constructivists and Dadaists, the one in Weimar in September being perhaps the most notable. It is significant that six of the participants went on to write theoretical works on the role of typography in the new aesthetics. (**fig. 17**)

What I am outlining here, therefore, is an intense, almost revelatory discovery of new ideas and forms in the years from 1922 to 1925. Tschichold first made contact with El Lissitzky in early 1925, through Moholy, but there was no doubt about the status Tschichold awarded to the Russian in “Elementare Typographie”, whom he described as the “leading figure” and “the archetype of the new designer who counts among the best practitioners of the New Typography”. It was at this time that Tschichold adopted the first name “Ivan”, referring to himself in a letter of January 1925 as “the only typographic Constructivist in Leipzig”.²²

Where was the Bauhaus in all this activity? It is quite clear that Tschichold and his wife Edith were warmly received there; a portrait photograph of Edith by Lucia Moholy probably taken c. 1926, testifies to their friendship, as does the correspondence between the two women over the decades.²³ But Tschichold, who throughout his career was a stickler for high standards of design and presswork, can hardly have been impressed by the equipment or teaching of typography in the Bauhaus. After all, in 1970 he was very critical of the teaching he himself had received at the Academy in Leipzig, between 1919 and 1922.²⁴ In *Typographische Mitteilungen*, Tschichold made a point of the fact that the Bauhaus was “only one of several streams

leading to modern design”.²⁵ I would suggest that the significance of the New Typography at the Bauhaus had more to do with the construction of a public image for the college, rather than subscribing to the ideals in their teaching. Most of the college’s publicity, like the headed notepaper, was prepared by staff and sent out for printing; this was especially true

19 Lampe 2018.

20 Botar 2006.

21 Kassák and Moholy-Nagy 1922.

22 Tschichold to El Lissitzky, 19 January 1925, reproduced in Burke 2007: 40.

23 There was also a correspondence between Tschichold and Gropius, initially over the purchase of a rug designed by Klee, but developing later into a more familiar exchange of views.

24 Tschichold 1992 (1970): 361–362.

25 *Typographische Mitteilungen* 1925: 212.



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fig. 17

Photograph of the Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists held in Weimar on 25–26 September 1922.

From top to bottom and from left to right:

1st row: Lucia Moholy, Alfréd Kemény, László Moholy-Nagy; 2nd row: Lotte Burchartz, El Lissitzky (with pipe and cap), Cornelis van Eesteren, Bernhard Sturtzopf; 3rd row: Max Burchartz (with child on his shoulders), Harry Scheibe, Theo van Doesburg (with paper hat), Hans Vogel, Peter Röhl; 4th row: Alexa Röhl (in all black), Nelly van Doesburg, Tristan Tzara, Nini Smit, Hans Arp; 5th row: Werner Graeff and Hans Richter (on ground).

Note: "Nini Smit" close to Hans Arp is Sophie Taeuber (who would marry Arp on 20 October 1922). Kurt Schwitters is also thought to have attended the congress although he does not appear in the photograph.

Photographer unknown



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fig. 18

"Die Sport Ausstellung" (The Sport Exhibition), poster designed by Walter Dexel for the exhibition held in Magdeburg, 25 September – 13 October 1929. Photolithograph.

of the *Bauhausbücher* (Bauhaus Books) series overseen by Moholy, and the college magazine designed by Herbert Bayer, who ran the Advertising Design course for one year in 1926–27. Even at Dessau, the print workshop had only a marginal role in the curriculum. The significance of this is not to reveal the inadequacies of the Bauhaus so much as to offer a more precise recognition of the true achievements of the college. As early as 1980, it was suggested that the Bauhaus had only a modest impact on design for industry, but that it had exerted a huge influence on teaching and on the lifestyle and working methods of the Modern Art and design student.²⁶

It is also true that many practitioners of the New Typography were quite hostile towards the Bauhaus which they regarded as an elitist and remote institution, at a time when Modernist designers were seeking a collective front against reactionary opposition. The members of the Ring “Neue Werbegestalter” (Circle “New Advertising Designers”), the association set up in 1928 by Kurt Schwitters and Robert Michel, of which Tschichold was an enthusiastic member, were annoyed by the high-handed treatment they received from the Bauhaus authorities when approached about collaboration on exhibition projects and publications. When Schwitters circulated the comments from the Bauhaus to Ring members, he received a stream of critical responses, one of which stated: “There is a risk that our tendency could be viewed as being influenced by the Bauhaus. [...] it is neither pleasant, nor beneficial, to be put in the same pot as the Bauhaus”.²⁷ As a result, *Gefesselter Blick* (The Captivated Gaze), the 1930 survey of modern graphic design which was largely organised through the Ring, included only one representative from the Bauhaus, Moholy-Nagy, who had long since left the college.²⁸

These resentments did not disappear through time. Walter Dexel, who had been at the Bauhaus in 1922 when the dominant ethos was one of quasi-mystical Expressionism, remained unimpressed by the achievements of the Bauhaus, a view that turned to indignation as the college's reputation grew in the post-war years to encompass all innovation in modern design. This prompted Dexel to write an article entitled “Der Bauhausstil. Ein Mythos” (The Bauhaus Style. A Myth), to set the record straight about what the Bauhaus had actually achieved: “It is clear that the new ideas that emerged in the 1920s did not originate at the Bauhaus. [...] The term ‘Bauhaus style’ is a myth, an unauthorised simplification and an unfair concealment of the many important forces that have worked to create the style of that time”.²⁹ In terms of the New Typography, it was colleges like the Kunstgewerbeschule at Bielefeld, Breslau and Magdeburg (where Dexel taught), or the Städelschule in Frankfurt, as well as the Meisterschule für Deutschlands Buchdrucker (Master School for Germany's Book Printers) in Munich, where Tschichold and Paul Renner taught,

that were more likely to train up the next generation of modern graphic designers. **(fig. 18)**

The conclusions I draw from this are fairly simple. First, that reputations grow for many reasons, so an institution like the Bauhaus can accrue great prestige in an area like print and graphic design, although that was never a major element in

26 In *Industrial Design*, John Heskett (1980: 103) states, “Bauhaus products appear no more than a miniscule contribution from an avant-garde fringe group”. For an indication of the new fashions and self-presentation of Bauhaus students, see the exhibition *Bauhaus: Art as Life*, London, Barbican Centre, 3 May – 12 August 2012.

27 Cited in Kees Broos, “Das kurze, aber heftige Leben des Rings ‘Neue Werbegestalter’”, in Rattemeyer and Helms 1990: 9.

28 Rasch and Rasch 1930.

29 Dexel 1976: 17–20, translated in Dexel 2020: 108.

the curriculum of the college. The New Typography was only ever a minor aspect of the teaching but a powerful element in shaping the image of the Bauhaus. Secondly, this brief account of the reformers and private press advocates in the years before and after World War I suggests that a different mind-set was needed to break out of the conventions of *Buchkunst* and fine printing, moored as it was to a combination of traditional values and established technical possibilities. El Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy belonged to a world unconstrained by tradition and available technology, so were already thinking of the potential of printed text and imagery beyond the technical means of achieving it. Tschichold said as much in his tribute to his friend: "Lissitzky was probably not concerned how the compositor was to set up his sketches. Drawing was often the only course open to him, because type was incapable of producing what he wanted. [His work], original and powerful though it might be, betrays the struggle of the amateur typographer with the ancient and intractable mysteries of printing".³⁰

This could be interpreted as criticism, but it also indicates how the amateur or the avant-gardist may conceive of possibilities that cannot be achieved with the technologies available. In some cases, the absence of formal training may be beneficial, allowing for more liberated thinking. But equally, that serves to emphasise why Tschichold's position was so crucial for the development and acceptance of the new manner. Operating between the two camps of fine printers and the Constructivist avant-garde, while not compromising either, the publications "Elementare Typographie" and *Die neue Typographie* were an essential conduit between practice and theory at a time when these two worlds must have seemed incompatible.

30 Jan Tschichold, "El Lissitzky (1890–1941)",
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