

**The Museum, the Printer and
the New Typography: Jan Tschichold
in London (1935–1948)**

Sandy Jones¹

In May 1935, Jan Tschichold arrived in London from Switzerland to explore opportunities for employment and turned to his international network of friends and supporters to ask for assistance. Having fled from Germany following a period of *Schutzhaft* (protective custody, or extra-legal detention) on the charge of “cultural Bolshevism”, his financial situation was precarious. As an emigrant he was restricted in the number of hours he could work, so it made sense to look further afield. By then, he had already established a reputation as the key spokesperson for the New Typography through his published articles in British trade journals such as *The Penrose Annual* and *Commercial Art*. With London the locus for Britain’s response to Modernism, Tschichold’s visit was well timed and would prepare the ground for his future projects and collaborations.

The focus of this essay is Tschichold’s activities in London between 1935–1938 as an exhibition maker, designer and New Typography advocate, through the lens of two case studies: the printer, Percy Lund Humphries and the museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). It considers the extent to which his principles of the New Typography were accepted in British commercial art printing and asks why attempts to publish his texts in 1948 were unsuccessful.

Context

It was no coincidence that an interest in modern architecture, art and design arose in Britain during a period of economic depression in the early 1930s. Discontent with standards of design in manufacturing, felt to be inferior to French and German methods, was combined with a belief that an improvement in the design and quality of consumer goods would enable Britain to compete more successfully in international markets. Initiatives led by the Government and commerce were launched with the aim of improving design standards, influencing public taste and persuading the manufacturing industry to invest in design.

In late 1933, the Council for Art and Industry (CAI) was established on the recommendation of the Gorell Report, which had been commissioned by the Board of Trade to assess “the production and exhibition of articles of good design and everyday use”.² A direct descendant of the British Institute of Industrial Art and a precursor to the Design Council, the CAI was chaired by London Transport’s Chief Executive, Frank Pick, a founder of the

1 The author would like to thank Jeremy Aynsley, Ruth Hibbard, Richard Hollis, Robin Kinross, Lucy Myers, Alan Powers, Graham Twemlow and Deborah Sutherland.
2 Gorell 1932.

Design and Industries Association (DIA), where he was appointed President in 1932. These organisations shared similar aims: to unite manufacturers and designers in the improvement of the quality of industrial design.

Pick was one of several influential figures in commerce with a marked bias towards Modernism, who were convinced that advanced forms of contemporary design were the best way to attract the public's attention and communicate the qualities of modern products and services. Together with Jack Beddington at Shell-Mex, C. F. Snowden Gamble at Imperial Airways, William Crawford of advertising agency W. S. Crawford and Stephen Tallents at the General Post Office, Pick provided essential employment for artists, some fleeing oppressive regimes, and brought Modern Art into the public realm through architecture, advertising and exhibitions. In a review of the *Exhibition of Pictures in Advertising by Shell-Mex & BP Ltd.* (1938) they were dubbed "the new Medici" by art critic Cyril Connolly, who proposed they had changed the paradigm of art patronage and the exhibition "marked the beginning of a new era in the relations of creative Modern Art and big business".³ Commerce and contemporary design, therefore, could play a decisive role in broadening the reception of Modernism.

With the involvement of Modern artists, perceptions of commercial art began to change and it was exhibited in galleries. The Zwemmer Gallery, an extension of its bookshop, actively promoted Modern Art with exhibitions from artists Matisse and Picasso (1933), Eric Ravilious (1933) and commercial art from fine printers Curwen Press (1932) who also provided employment for Modern artists. The London Gallery staged solo exhibitions for Herbert Bayer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1937) with the latter opened by Walter Gropius. Significantly, the *Exhibition of British Art in Industry* (1935) organised by The Royal Academy and the Royal Society of Art (RSA) included a display on commercial art.

Other currents of Modernist cross-disciplinary thinking came from artists, architects and educators who formed groups, published manifestos and held exhibitions such as Unit One (1933–1935) and The Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group (1933–1957). Journals such as *Axis*, *Signature*, *Typography*, *Commercial Art and Industry* were influential in introducing contemporary European trends to the British trade together with overseas journals *Gebrauchsgraphik* and *Arts et métiers*. The London outpost of the Reimann School and Studios of Industrial and Commercial Art, a private school of German origin, was established in 1937 with an advisory council that included Edward McKnight Kauffer and Jack Beddington.

There was still, however, a broad acceptance of New Traditionalism, a movement with its foundations in William Morris' Kelmscott Press. Yet, unlike Morris, New Traditionalism accepted machine composition and rejected overuse of decoration. Stanley Morison's *First Principles of Typography* (1930) summarised the movement's design philosophy and played an important part in the revival of historic typefaces during his tenure as typographical advisor to the Monotype Corporation. Highly visible sans serif typefaces such as Edward Johnston's standard alphabet for London Underground (Johnston Sans, 1916) and Gill Sans (1928) had emerged, but traditional typefaces were still in wide circulation.

3 Connolly 1934.

The Printer

In the early 1930s, Tschichold had begun to build his reputation through articles in trade journals, such as *Commercial Art*, which published his influential text "New Life in Print" (1930) and referred to *Die neue Typographie*, as "little short of a revolution".⁴

In March 1935, Tschichold wrote to his friend, artist Ben Nicholson, to request the address of Edward McKnight Kauffer in London. Nicholson obliged and wrote back to encourage Tschichold to visit, "it will be most important for the development of the contemporary movement here if you are able to come and I think you will find many friends and receive a good welcome".⁵

Lund Humphries' joint managing directors Eric Beresford Humphries and Eric Craven (Peter) Gregory had appointed Kauffer as design director in 1933. Lund Humphries had a tradition of placing design and technical innovation at the heart of their business strategy and had appointed Stanley Morison as consultant in 1923. Humphries brought technical printing knowledge and an interest in modern typography, while Gregory was based in London and an important figure in the contemporary art scene. In 1932, the sales office moved to Bedford Square and installed a design studio and dark room, which Kauffer shared with commercial artist Maurice Vaughan Bennett and photographers Francis Bruguière and Man Ray. As a former employee, Anthony Bell recalled on the culture of the business, "something of the spirit of the Bauhaus rubbed off in our composing room, even before the arrival in our midst of Jan Tschichold, the high priest of asymmetry".⁶ Unusually, Lund Humphries extended an open invitation to artists to use their facilities and opened an "exhibition room" in 1933. The first exhibition was from Bruguière in collaboration with Kauffer (1933). (fig. 52) In 1934, the programme included shows from Hans Schleger and Man Ray, as well as the *Exhibition of Commercial Art*, which showcased the work of eight commercial artists including Edward Bawden, Theyre Lee Elliott and Stella Steyn. With Lund Humphries actively promoting contemporary design, it is not surprising Tschichold was offered an exhibition when he visited London in May 1935.

Lund Humphries staged the *Typographical Work of Jan Tschichold* from 27 November to 14 December 1935. In the introduction to the exhibition, they took the opportunity to clarify their position: "We do not therefore imply that we dogmatically abide by his principles of typography. We simply are anxious to let his work, which we believe to be of outstanding merit, speak for itself".⁷ In a review, Robert Harling, a supporter of Tschichold, observed that his work was "far ahead of even the most advanced of the modern school in England", yet he proposed it would take another twenty-five years before he would be accepted, commenting that it was "not so much a distance of technique as a distance of mind".⁸

In 1936, Tschichold's work was displayed in Lund Humphries' *Exhibition of Printing and Commercial Design* and he received two further commissions: the redesign of their letterhead which would serve as an effective form of personal advertising with its inclusion of "designed by Jan Tschichold" and the highly significant design of issue 40 of *The Penrose Annual* (1938), in

which he demonstrated that classicism and the New Typography were not mutually exclusive.

Tschichold's move away from the more rigid principles of the

⁴ *Commercial Art* 1930.

⁵ Nicholson 1935.

⁶ Bell 1981.

⁷ Lund Humphries 1934.

⁸ Harling 1936b.

movement had already been voiced in an article, “New Typography”, published in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937) where he wrote: “the form should arise clearly and unequivocally out of the requirements of the text and pictures only, and according to the functions of the printed matter. New traditionalism in typography demands exactly the same”.⁹ That spring, an opportunity arose to network with the key figures of the publishing and printing establishment including New Traditionalists, Morison and Eric Gill when he was invited by the Double Crown Club to read his paper on “A New Approach to Typography”; Tschichold would become an honorary member in 1949.

The Museum

In addition to his own design work and promotion of his typographic beliefs in his writings, Tschichold’s impact on British design came about through his interest in collecting and archiving modern designs from across his international network of designers.

Another collector of modern design was the Deputy Keeper of the National Art Library at the V&A, Philip James, who established the Jobbing Printing Collection between 1936 and early 1940. James wrote to high-profile companies and designers from Britain, Europe and North America including Ashley Havinden, Edward Bawden, Herbert Bayer, Hans Schleger, Draeger Frères and Bauersche Giesserei to request examples of their work to create “an open reference collection of commercial typography”. (fig. 53) He shared the view that commercial art was an effective tool for business and believed that British design was lagging behind Europe, commenting: “Continental jobbing printing responds far more quickly to current movements in art and design than does the work produced at home”.¹¹

James launched the collection with an exhibition at the museum, *Modern Commercial Typography* (1936–37) and an article in *Typography* (1936), where he acknowledged the collection of ephemera that must have surely inspired his own, John Johnson’s “Sanctuary of Printing” at Oxford University Press.¹² On display were ninety-nine objects from forty-four designers with overseas work from the Bauhaus, Herbert Bayer, László Moholy-Nagy, Tschichold and, somewhat surprisingly, Fauvist Raoul Dufy. In his curation, James drew attention to modern typography’s connection to abstract art, as Tschichold had done in his published work.

The British material, representing around fifty per cent of the exhibition, expressed a tendency towards illustration and wood-engraving, evident in Eric Ravilious’ cover design for the BBC and Rex Whistler’s Valentine’s Day telegram for the General Post Office (GPO). The influence of Modern Art movements was apparent in Ceri Edward’s abstract illustration for ocean liner *SS Orion*, Serge Chermayeff’s *Colours* trade catalogue, influenced by Constructivism, for Nobel Chemical Finishes and Hans Schleger’s Surrealist “eye” illustration for Shell-BP. (fig. 54)

The exhibition received praise and criticism, reflecting the mixed views that much Modern Art and design was receiving at the time. *Art and Industry* commented: “A careful balance between the Continent and England. Nothing parochial here”.¹³ The *Architects’ Journal* criticised its curation: “No straightforward

9 Tschichold 1971.

10 James 1936.

11 *Ibid.*

12 James 1939.

13 Harling 1936a.

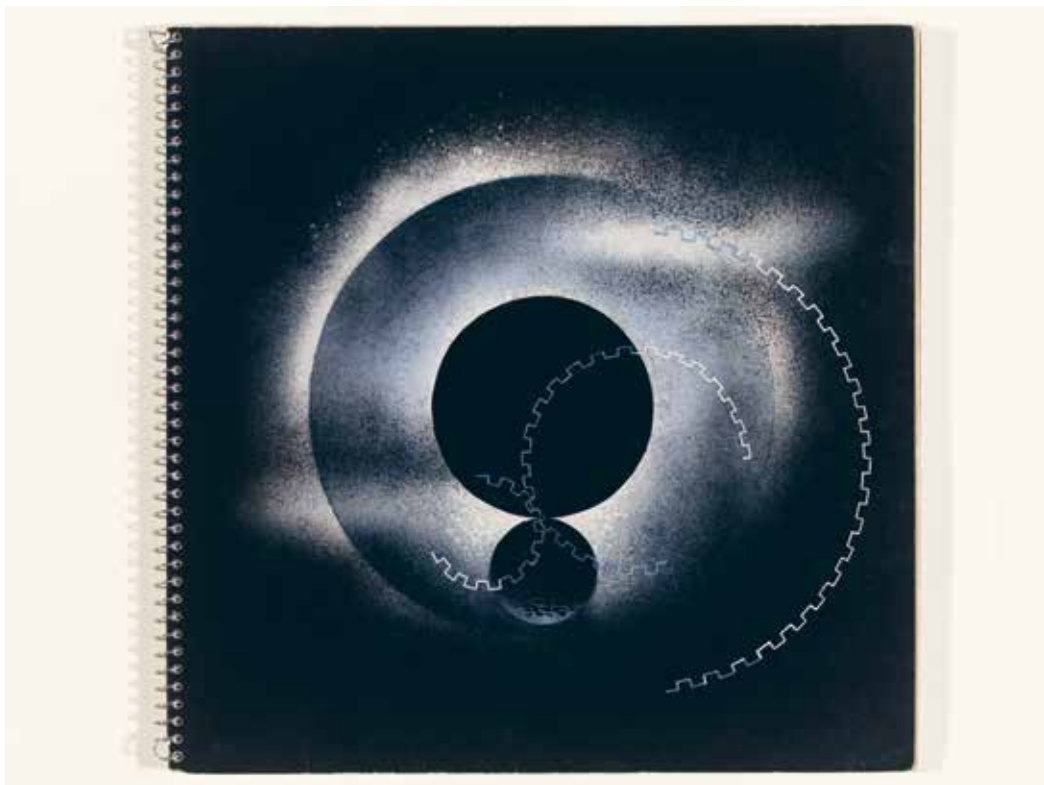


52



fig. 53

Examples of modern commercial typography collected by Philip James, Keeper of the V&A's Library, for the Jobbing Printing Collection he initiated between 1936 and early 1940.



54

fig. 54

"The Self Changing or Pre-selective Epicyclic Gear",
cover design and illustration by Hans Schleger (Zero)
for Shell-Mex & BP Ltd. and printed by Percy Lund Humphries, 1937.
Jobbing Printing Box 3.

jobbing is included in this collection, and there is some dull Continental work inspired by one -ism or another".¹⁴ BBC journal *The Listener* noted: "These are excesses which a hopeful critic will take as due to an abundance of vitality and over-stimulated imaginations".¹⁵

In London for his Double Crown Club talk, Tschichold visited James' exhibition twice and promised to sell him material from his personal collection of New Typography. In July 1937, the museum purchased twenty books and more than one hundred and fifty examples of commercial art including his own work and that of Herbert Bayer, El Lissitzky, Max Burchartz and Ladislav Sutnar amongst others for 206 Swiss francs (corresponding to ca. 1100 CHF in 2025). **(figs. 55–57)**. A roll of "more than 57" posters was declined and brokered for sale to Beaumont Newhall at MoMA.¹⁶ Tschichold also included fragments of personal correspondence from Josef Albers and the Bauhaus. **(fig. 58)** Significantly, this would be the only purchase for the Jobbing Printing Collection.

Kinross suggests that Tschichold's motivation to sell was either due to his change in approach to design or the need to generate income, or possibly both.¹⁷ I suggest he also wished to safeguard his collection with trusted institutions and insert himself into the narrative of the movement as its key advocate.

During World War II, the Jobbing Printing Collection was moved to a back office, where it remained for almost twenty years. Designer and educator Richard Hollis recalls that he came across Tschichold's collection around 1958, housed in a red box under the library counter and because of the correspondence, it was easy to identify and connect the material with *Die neue Typographie*.¹⁸ In the 1960s, he was allowed, with Nicholas Biddulph, a fellow teacher at the Central School of Art, to photograph some of the material for lecture slides.¹⁹

Influence

Assessing the extent to which the New Typography influenced British commercial art printing during the 1930s is problematic. As ephemeral objects, the majority of commercial art in circulation would have been disposed of and was never intended for collection, exchange or display. As Attfield observes about what is perceived as ephemera, "its value lies in its consequence to the moment [...] yet its quality of impermanence can make a lasting impression".²⁰ As a snapshot of commercial art during this period, the Jobbing Printing Collection provides a useful starting point, although it is important to acknowledge that it is a curated collection regarded as best practice. The contemporary views of those working in the trade also provide valuable insights.

Looking at a cross-section of Jobbing Printing boxes, those influenced by the New Typography are easily identified through their use of asymmetry, photomontage, contrast of scale and accents of colour. **(figs.**

59–62) Illustration also features strongly providing a particularly British inflection. Who produced this material and for what purpose? A closer reading shows that it was the "new" industries – energy companies, plastics, travel, broad-

¹⁴ V&A Archive 1936b.

¹⁵ V&A Archive 1936a.

¹⁶ V&A Archive 1937.

¹⁷ Kinross 2018.

¹⁸ Kinross 2023.

¹⁹ Haworth-Booth 1971.

²⁰ Attfield 2000.

casting and construction – which used these techniques to project their progressiveness. However, it remained just one expression among many rather than an exclusive commitment.

For those working in the trade, views on the New Typography were divided. John C. Tarr, writing in *Commercial Art and Industry*, observed it held “little appeal for the English-speaking printer, and when used was greeted with ridicule or indifference”, but conceded that some commercial artists such as Kauffer were doing “excellent work”.²¹

Two papers presented as part of the Cantor Lectures²² series on typography held at the RSA in 1938 further illustrate this division. Harold Curwen, Director of Curwen Press, was critical of what he called “geometrical continentalism” and lamented its lack of clarity in bookwork: “Modernism comes before considerations of readableness [...] the message it was intended to convey is often lost in a welter of another ‘isms’”. Adding that a foundation in traditional techniques was essential to master modern fonts, “The typographer who, without any grounding in traditional form, lets loose amongst these types is, however, in a very dangerous paradise”.²³

Bertram Evans, editor of *Industrial Arts*, held an opposing view: Great Britain, and to a lesser extent, America, were shut off by an indomitable ignorance of what was going on. Never has the isolation of this country appeared in a less splendid light. Walls of prejudice, general inability to read the German language, and a fortified self-complacency, excluded this country from any share in this new birth of typography. The number of those in this country who have any grasp of the new principles, is very small.²⁴

There can be little doubt that the movement was polarising, attracting both admiration and hostility.

By mid-1939 the war had intervened and I suggest that it was the Ministry of Information that assumed the role of the “new Medici” in its brief exploration of Modernism as an effective weapon of propaganda in wartime exhibitions and posters.²⁵ In Switzerland, Tschichold consolidated his reputation as a book designer with projects including fifty-three titles in the Birkhäuser Classics series and a publication on early Chinese colour printing.

In May 1945, typographer Anthony Froshaug wrote to Tschichold to propose a collaborative project with designer and writer Ruari Maclean to

publish English translations of three of his texts: *Typografische Entwurfstechnik* (Typographic Design Technique, 1932), *Typographische Gestaltung* (Typographic Design, 1935) and *Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung* (A Lesson in Printing Design, 1930).²⁶ Layouts were designed, contracts signed and publication of all three texts initially proposed for 1946. *Technics of Typographical Layout*, a translation of the manual *Typografische Entwurfstechnik* (1932) would be the first one published.²⁷

²¹ Tarr 1935.

²² The Cantor Lectures were named after Edward Theodore Cantor, who was a surgeon in the Indian Medical Service. Upon his death in 1860 he bequeathed a large sum to the Royal Society of Arts in order to promote their objectives (encouraging arts, manufacture and commerce). It was decided to begin a course of lectures on industrial technology which ran annually and began in 1864. The last series of Cantor Lectures took place in 1990.

²³ Curwen 1938.

²⁴ Evans 1938.

²⁵ Jones 2015.

²⁶ Froshaug 1945.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



55

fig. 55

The examples shown, drawn from the collection sold to the museum's library by Jan Tschichold illustrate the key principles of the New Typography such as: asymmetry, a bold use of colour, sans serif fonts, shifts in scale and perspective and a dynamic use of photomontage. "Sommerblumen am Funkturm" designed by Herbert Bayer and Kurt Kranz, Gemeinnützige Berliner Ausstellungs-, Messe- und Fremdenverkehrs GmbH, 1934. Jobbing Printing Box 22 (a).

MIT DER STRASSENBAHN NACH HILDESHEIM

DAS NORDISCHE NÜRNBERG

Mit Linie 11 nach Hildesheim.

FAHRZEITEN:

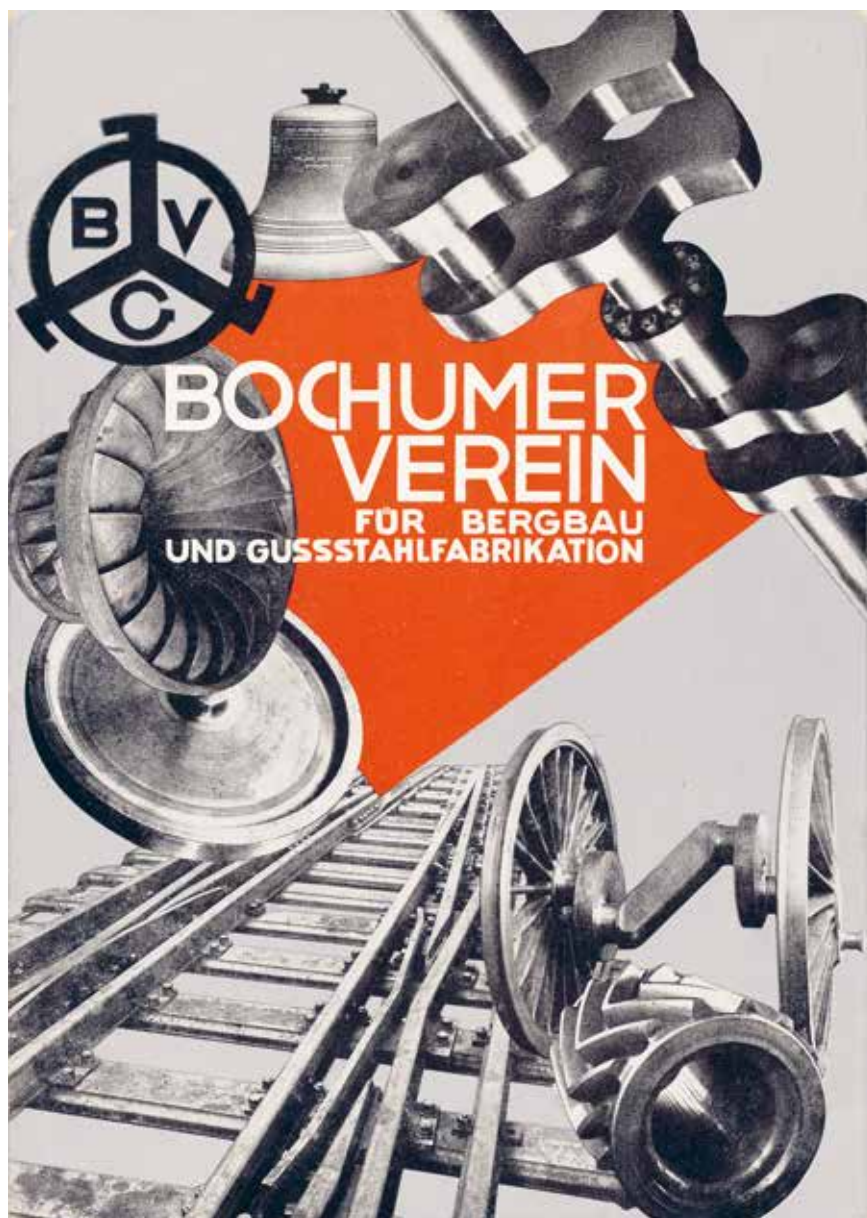
Ab Hannover: 5:00 W, 6:00 W, 7:00 W, 7:30 W, 8:00 W, 8:30 W, 9:00 W, 10:00 W, 11:00 W, 12:00 W, 13:00 W, 14:00 W, 15:00 W, 16:00 W, 17:00 W, 18:00 W, 19:00 W, 20:00 W, 21:00 W, 22:00 W, 23:00 W, 24:00 W

Ab Hildesheim: 5:00 W, 6:00 W, 7:00 W, 8:00 W, 8:30 W, 9:00 W, 10:00 W, 11:00 W, 12:00 W, 13:00 W, 14:00 W, 15:00 W, 16:00 W, 17:00 W, 18:00 W, 19:00 W, 20:00 W, 21:00 W, 22:00 W

* nur im Sommer - W = werktags

Fahrzeit nur 75 Minuten.

Je nach Bedarf verkehren auch Sonderzüge mit kürzerer Fahrzeit.
Besonders empfehlenswerte Ausflüge im Touristenfahrplan, beim Schaffner für 25 Pf. zu kaufen.



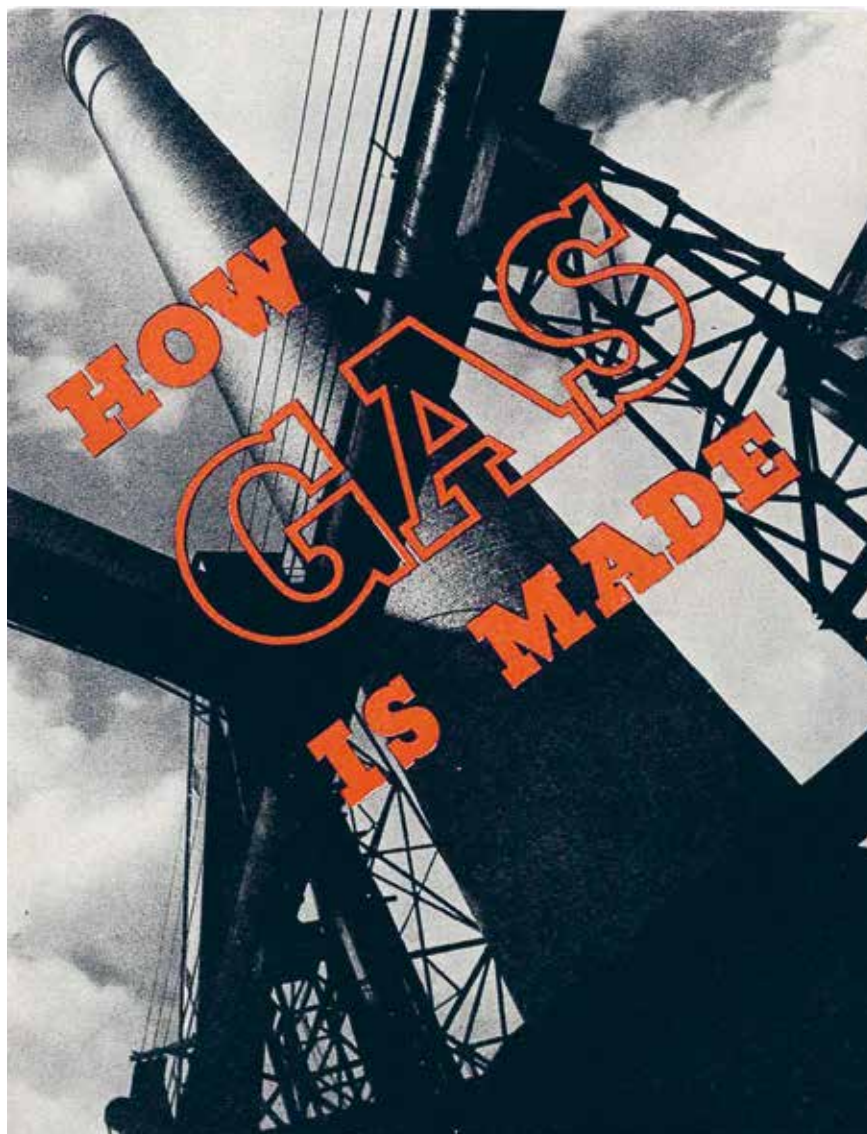
57

fig. 57

"Bochumer Verein für Bergbau und Gussstahlfabrikation",
trade catalogue designed by Max Burchartz and Johannes
Canis, c. 1928. Jobbing Printing Box 22(a).

19. II. 32

Lieber Herr Tschichold,
 besten Dank für Ihren Brief.
 Den Prospekt „Hafen“. Sie offenkundig
 welche Hafenanlagen der Stadt
 Magdeburg gibt heraus:
 Mittelalt. Kanal-Hafen Anlage
 Drucks: Vahlfeld Magdeburg Hb
 Ihrem Bruder schreiben ich einen
 Prospekt.
 Ich besten Glauben Ihr Herr



59

fig. 59

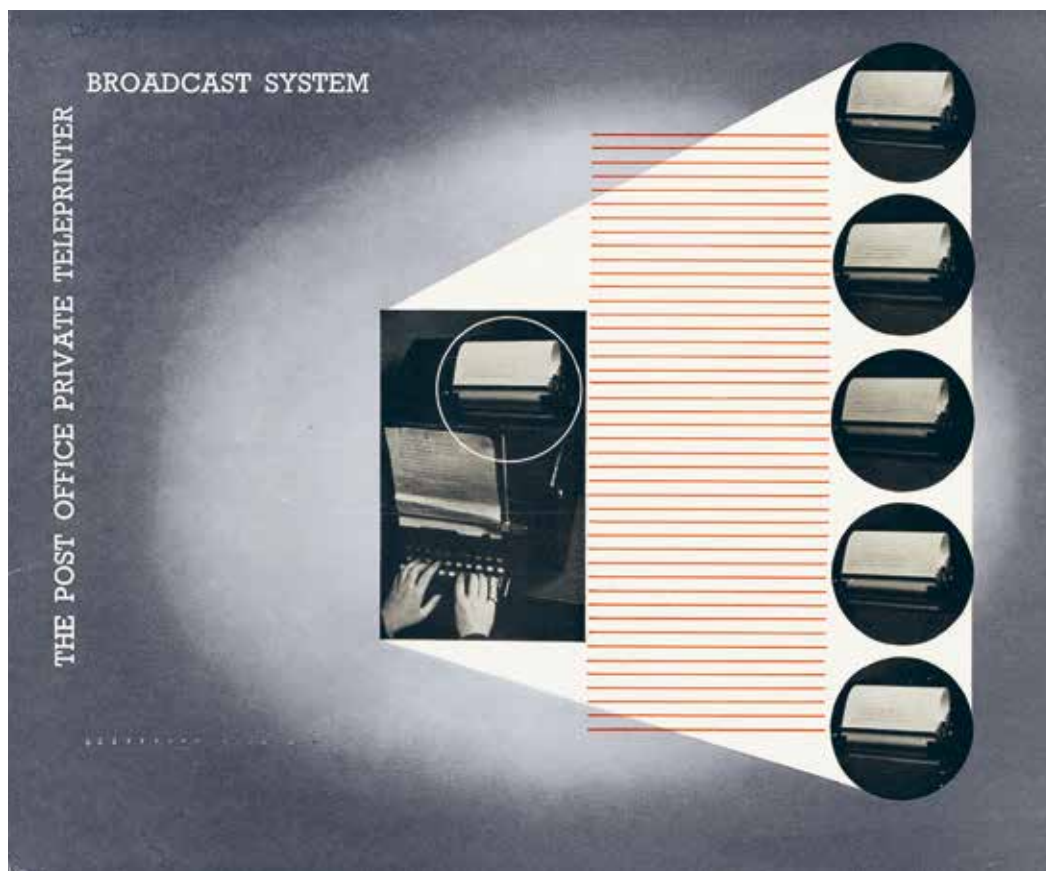
These British examples show how the "new" British industries of the 1930s embraced New Typography techniques to project their organisations as modern and technologically advanced. "How Gas is Made Trade", trade catalogue, designer unknown, published by the Gas, Light and Coke Company, 1930s. Jobbing Printing Box 33.



60

fig. 60

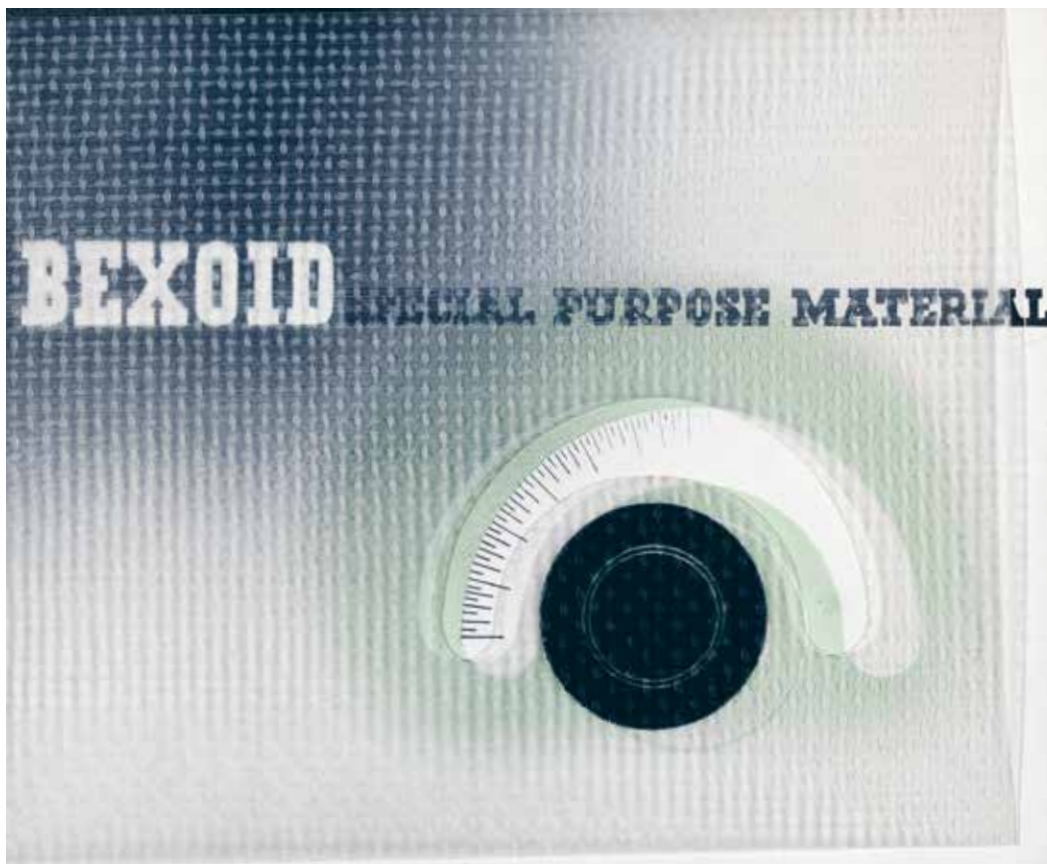
"Zn", designer unknown, published by the Zinc Development Association Limited, 1930s.
Jobbing Printing Box 7.



61

fig. 61

"The Post Office Private Teleprinter Broadcast System",
trade literature, designed by Richard Beck and published by
the General Post Office, 1938. Jobbing Printing Box 8a.



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In 1948, Tschichold, restricted by a contract at Penguin Books, withdrew from the project and explained:

The time for publishing this book is past [...] I don't think it is a useless book, and I even like typography as you do it sometimes, which proves to me that it has now become good old wine, but actually I prefer still older wine now, and would not like people to be confused by a book of a very different old Tschichold!²⁸

It was now twenty years since he had first published *Die neue Typographie* and in his view it was no longer “new”, it was “old”. An English translation of *The New Typography* would not be published until 1995.

Conclusion

Tschichold's activity in London reached its zenith between 1935 and 1938 and he was viewed as crucially important for other advocates of Modernism in design, for whom he served as a catalyst and exponent, and a model to follow. However, his approach described in the trade as an “uprooting of convention”²⁹ provoked both admiration and criticism.

A cross-section of British commercial art from the Jobbing Printing Collection has shown that the “new” industries were amongst those experimenting with the New Typography, although not exclusively. In British commercial art printing a plurality of styles co-existed, as Conekin observes: “British modernity was always a balancing act between innovation and tradition”.³⁰ However, this pluralism was not just a feature of British design, as Jeremy Aynsley notes: “Modernism was far from the mainstream or most commonplace choice for the everyday German household”.³¹

A trade broadly committed to tradition, World War II, Tschichold's change in design philosophy and work for Penguin Books, the lack of English language versions of his key texts and a new world order rendered the New Typography the spirit of a bygone age, yet its influence on typography practitioners in Britain endures.

28 Tschichold 1948.

29 *The Penrose Annual* 1938.

30 Conekin 1999.

31 Aynsley 2009.

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