

The New Typographic Wave¹

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A Dynamic, Interrelated and Overlapping History of Typography

A pivotal figure of 20th-century typographic development, Jan Tschichold became a champion of the Modernist movement that developed between the two world wars. Though Modernist ideas were especially popular in Central Europe, they also had global currency and came to America through various channels, including organisations, publications, exhibitions, conferences and migration. Today, Tschichold's work keeps on being disseminated by means of collections held by museums and private institutions. These collections continue to present the work, imbuing it with their specific positioning, sensibility and approach to preservation. Through this institutional presentation, his oeuvre has come to attract an increasingly diverse public ranging from researchers to curators, designers, historians and amateurs, each of whom

approaches the work with different motives. For instance, Richard Hendel writes in the foreword of the 2006 edition of *The New Typography*: "It is appropriate that the University of California Press includes [*The New Typography*] in a series devoted to German cultural criticism, because it is perhaps now more pertinent as a piece of design history than a graphic design manual".²

Tschichold's estate is dispersed amongst several institutions, most of which are in Europe.³ It is therefore surprising that the Jan and Edith Tschichold papers are held by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles – at quite a distance from their European origins.⁴ An entity of the J. Paul Getty Trust, one of the world's wealthiest art institutions, the Getty Research Institute maintains a research library, organises exhibitions and other events, sponsors a scholars residency programme, publishes books and produces electronic databases. The substantial Tschichold collection consists of the correspond-

¹ The title of this text was coined by Roland Fröh for a sub-chapter discussing the dissemination of Weingart's ideas in the book *30 Years of Swiss Discourse in the Typographische Monatsblätter*. Merging "The New Typography" and "New Wave", the wordplay seems even more relevant in the context of this essay to describe the meeting of the legacy of the New Typography with Californian culture.

² Tschichold 2006 (1928): xlv.

³ The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Leipzig, Germany, the Kantonsbibliothek in St Gallen, Switzerland, and the Bibliothek für Gestaltung in Basel, Switzerland, have dedicated Tschichold collections. There are many other organisations that hold some documents related to Tschichold, such as the Haushofer Archive and the MAN Historisches Archiv und Museum in Germany the Roche Historical Collection and Archive in Switzerland; the Westerdahl Archive in Spain; the Békés Archive in Hungary; the University of Bristol Library Special Collections, the Hyman Kreitman Research Centre for the Tate Library and Archive, the St Bride Library and the V&A in the United Kingdom; MoMA, the Archives at Yale, and the Merrill C. Berman Collection in the United States, to name just the commonly known ones. Burke 2007: 326.

⁴ Jan Tschichold, Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer et al., *Jan and Edith Tschichold Papers, 1899–1979 (bulk 1920–1938)*, 1899, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, https://www.getty.edu/GRJ/GETTY_ALMA21137821510001551 (accessed 4 July 2023).

ence between Jan Tschichold and his wife, Edith, and a number of artists, many of whom are figures associated with the Bauhaus. The correspondence is mainly written in German. Although the US Census Bureau lists over fifty million Americans claiming German ancestry, English is the de facto national language in the country, and most Americans are unilingual. The second most spoken language in the US is Spanish, which is commonly used in Los Angeles, partly due to the proximity of Mexico. This linguistic landscape underscores the disconnection of Tschichold's correspondence and redefines the significance of popular diffusion, but does not compromise other institutional objectives, such as providing researchers access to the resources. Besides, Los Angeles (or more broadly, California) is a location that does not seem to hold any particular importance in the life or work of Tschichold, save for his acquaintance with Jack Stauffacher from San Francisco, who he met in the 1950s.⁵ The displacement of the collection may then appear as a decontextualization.⁶

The Gradual Development of Modernism in the United States

Tschichold published *Die neue Typographie* in the aftermath of World War I and alongside the development of avant-garde movements, Modernism and the Bauhaus – all culturally and geographically distant from 1920s California and the United States. Modern Art, styles and ideas were gradually gaining ground in the US at the time, but they were doing so at a slower pace than in Europe. The arrival of Modernism in the US is marked by the renowned 1913 Armory Show, which sparked a widespread outcry and led to a dismissal of Modern Art and design by the American public.⁷ Commenting on the works in the exhibition, former president Theodore Roosevelt exclaimed: “That’s not art!”⁸ It was only with the opening of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City in 1929 that Modern Art would finally be acknowledged on the country’s East Coast. “In the nation”, the art historian Lloyd Goodrich observed, “the foundation of the new museum marks the final apotheosis of Modernism and its acceptance into respectable society”.⁹

On the West Coast, however, the presence of Modern Art was still in its infancy. While the San Francisco Museum of Art was founded in 1935, it was only in 1975 that it added “Modern” to its name and became SFMoMA, California’s flagship site of Modern and Contemporary Art.¹⁰ In Los Angeles, the Ferus Gallery, which operated from 1957 to 1966, greatly helped to build a Modern Art scene “from scratch”, as described in the documentary *The Cool School*.¹¹ In parallel, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) became a separate, art-focused institution in 1961.¹² Marcel

Duchamp’s first career retrospective in 1963 also seems to have generated momentum for the Modern Movement. The artist chose to present the exhibition in the unlikely location of Pasadena, a quiet, upscale Los Angeles suburb. Finally, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) opened in Los Angeles in 1979.¹³ The opening dates of these museums and galleries offer an in-

5 Pullman 2017.

6 Hallman 2005: 201–224.

7 Meggs and Purvis 2006: 336.

8 Roosevelt 1913. According to the biographer Edmund Morris, Roosevelt’s review looked with some favour upon the new American artists (Morris 2010: 267–272, 660–663).

9 Eskilson 2012: 259.

10 Baker 2009.

11 *The Cool School* (United States, 2008, colour, 60’), directed by Morgan Neville.

12 LACMA n.d.

13 MOCA n.d.

indicator of the timeline of recognition for avant-garde and contemporary in California, a timeline which differs from that of Central Europe.

Comparing it with an American publication from the same year, *Die neue Typographie* helps to outline the difference in attitude towards Modernism between the United States and Central Europe. *Layout in Advertising* was published in 1928 by the American type designer, calligrapher and book designer William Addison Dwiggins (1880–1956) and is considered a standard of the period. Both books are modern reflections of the spirit of their time. Though they both suggest design techniques and present exemplary works, their aesthetic sensibilities differ significantly. The choice of typefaces (sans serif vs. serif), alignments (centred vs. asymmetric), images (illustrations vs. photography), ornamentation (decorative vs. minimalist) appear as near-opposites. On the American side, we notice a wider variety of components and compositions than in *Die neue Typographie*, which is much more dogmatic. In the book's postscript, Dwiggins writes: "Modernism' is not a system of design – it is a state of mind. It is a natural and wholesome reaction against an overdose of traditionalism".¹⁴ This excerpt points at the differences and similarities between American and European Modernism. As the graphic designer and essayist Jeffery Keedy explains: "Unlike Tschichold, Dwiggins never embraced the Modernist movement, nor was he deified by it. However, he was absolutely committed to being a modern designer".¹⁵

Tschichold and Socialist Principles

Another aspect that could be examined is the broader context, including the designer's ideological perspective. Design historian Stephen Eskilson explains that

like the other members of the avant-garde, Tschichold considered *Die neue Typographie* to be exemplary of the merging of art and life that was a fundamental tenet of the modern design movements such as De Stijl, Constructivism and the Bauhaus. Rather than being simply a visual style, *Die neue Typographie* was to serve as the basis for a more just and equitable society administered according to socialist principles. However, it is unclear whether Tschichold was a "true believer" in the Soviet state or whether he was simply going through the motions of associating Constructivism and Socialism.¹⁶

Die neue Typographie was criticised by designers who believed that Tschichold lacked a clear political position. During Hannes Meyer's directorship, an anonymous review in the *Bauhaus* journal criticised Tschichold, referring to him as a dogmatic formalist.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Tschichold's book became a pivotal text on modern "functionalism" often misinterpreted as completely apolitical. It is likely that the truth of Tschichold's work lies between these two polarised distortions.

As for the political context of Los Angeles, a connection can be made to a certain disposition to socialism during the period. As the writer, activist and historian Mike Davis describes in *City of Quartz*, Los Angeles had notable ties to socialism in the early 20th century.¹⁸ Firstly, there was the influential

socialist politician, Job Harriman. In 1900, he ran for Vice President of the United States along with Eugene Debs on the ticket for the Socialist Party of America. He later ran twice

¹⁴ Dwiggins 1928: 193.

¹⁵ Keedy 1998.

¹⁶ Eskilson 2012: 237.

¹⁷ *Bauhaus* 1929: 28; Eskilson 2012: 237.

¹⁸ Davis 2018.

for mayor of Los Angeles, drawing considerable attention and support in each campaign. Harriman was also the founder of the Llano del Rio Cooperative Community. It was deemed “the most important non-religious utopian experiment in Western American history”, which at its height in 1916 “contained a thousand members and was a flourishing communitarian experiment dedicated to the principle of cooperation rather than competition”.¹⁹ Due to various challenges and financial difficulties, the project did not survive beyond the 1930s. Upon immigrating to America, escaping both the war and Hollywood, the author of *Brave New World* Aldous Huxley resided in a former Llano del Rio ranch house in the early 1940s, meditating on the fate of utopia.²⁰ California in the 1920s and 1930s also saw the rise of Upton Sinclair, the most famous socialist in Southern California. Davis writes: “[Upton’s] campaign was a crusade that lit fires in the hearts of millions of ordinary Californians, most of whom had never previously paid any attention to ideas from the Left”.²¹ The movie *There Will Be Blood*, which offers a critique of capitalism through the story of a silver miner turned oilman on a ruthless quest for wealth during Southern California’s oil boom, is actually partially based on the 1927 novel *Oil!* by Sinclair.²² Though these instances demonstrate a certain adoption of socialism in the American West, the cause remained marginal, whereas the mainstream continued to be focused on capitalism. If socialism was in fact Tschichold’s true inclination, there is a certain irony to his correspondences being housed in an institution that was created by virtue of one of the biggest American oil fortunes.²³ The intention here is not to confine art to institutions aligned with the artist’s beliefs; on the opposite, institutions should actively foster a diversity of perspectives and voices. This comparison exercise aimed to offer a thoughtful exploration of the context surrounding the creation of an artwork and to evaluate its enduring impact. Having said that, ultimately, the contextual milieu may undergo inevitable transformations, as noted by Robin Kinross in the introduction of the first English edition of *Die neue Typographie*: “the context of the present edition of *Die neue Typographie* is different from any that its author knew. Equally, the present edition will have an afterlife in contexts that we cannot imagine”.²⁴

Nationalism and Internationalism

The archival folder itself offers clues to the reasoning for the Getty Research Institute’s acquisition of the Tschichold papers. On the description sheet, the justification for this acquisition states: “The Centre’s Acquisition of the Tschichold Archive will strengthen the position of Los Angeles as an American centre for the study of typography and printing”. The collecting of artefacts by institutions is a complex issue, and in some cases, can be seen as a manifestation of a colonising impulse. The situation described here is clearly not an act of looting. Though the Tschichold acquisition by the Getty has been made through legal mechanisms, involving a mutual, contractual

agreement between two Western organisations, it remains a displacement of cultural objects from their place of origin. A parallel could be drawn with the current discussion about repatriation and cultural property. A collection housed in a single

¹⁹ Office of Historic Preservation n.d.

²⁰ Davis 2018: 10, 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*: XXVI.

²² *There Will be Blood* (United States, 2007, colour, 158’), directed by Paul Thomas Anderson.

²³ Whitman 1976.

²⁴ Tschichold 2006 (1928): xxxix.

place would certainly offer the clearest understanding of the life and work of Tschichold, but the question of which place remains. Notable efforts have been made by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek to digitise Tschichold's and make the collection accessible online.²⁵ However, as a physical location, neither Germany, Switzerland nor England seem entirely appropriate; Jan Tschichold lived in six cities over his lifetime (Leipzig, Berlin, Munich, Basel, London and Berzona, Switzerland) and to select one of these locations would further arguments for cultural nationalism.

Tschichold's stance on nationalist typography and, by extension, on nationalism appeared to consistently evoke negative emotions. For example, in a section of *Die neue Typographie* called "Type", Tschichold writes: "The emphatically national, exclusivist character of Fraktur – but also the equivalent national scripts of other peoples, for example of the Russians or the Chinese – contradicts present-day transnational bonds between people and forces their inevitable elimination".²⁶ Circa 1946, Tschichold began to openly reject the principles of *Die neue Typographie*, resulting in an intriguing paradox in which his publication was simultaneously receiving mainstream attention and Tschichold was proposing that the dogmatic manner in which he had defined the style in the book resembled the authoritarian mandates of the Nazis. In a seminar titled "Quousque Tandem..." (How Long...), Tschichold clearly states his new position: "I do not believe in the value of a 'national' typography. The attempt to create a 'national' typography is certainly, to my mind, a fallacy". He goes on to add: "In general, we should consider the typography of the western world as one and the same thing".²⁷ Throughout his life, Tschichold thus embraced a spirit of openness and internationalism.

A Correspondence Collection

From the first look at the content of the nine boxes that compose the Getty's Tschichold archive, it is clear that Tschichold built an impressive, international network based on these values of openness and internationalism. He quickly emerged as a central figure in international design discourse, particularly due to his ability to skilfully integrate and synthesise discussions about design and society.²⁸ His network included some of the most forward-thinking avant-garde artists and designers of the early 20th century. Dispersed across Europe (France, Germany, Russia, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Holland, Poland, Romania etc.), these artists and designers were active in Dadaism, De Stijl, Constructivism, Surrealism, had connections with the Bauhaus (as students and teachers) or were involved in some other kind of expression of modernity. The archive includes about sixty correspondents, including El Lissitzky, László Moholy-Nagy, Kurt Schwitters, Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer, Max Bill, Piet Mondrian, Ladislav Sutnar, and Piet Zwart among others.

Partly through his correspondence, Tschichold was able to curate an extensive collection of contemporary graphic design, which would come

to illustrate his written works. The Tschichold collection at the Getty includes many letters and postcards to which graphic samples were attached. The collection offers researchers a unique opportunity to see the artwork that Tschichold used

²⁵ Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, "The Jan Tschichold Estate", dnb.de/EN/Sammlungen/DBSM/Nachlaesse/nachlassJanTschichold/nachlassJanTschichold.html (accessed 4 July 2023).

²⁶ Tschichold 2006 (1928): 74–75.

²⁷ Tschichold 1964.

²⁸ Stirton 2019: 5.

to illustrate his discourse in *Die neue Typographie* in “real life” and “in action” (carrying messages, addresses, stamps and postage marks), such as a Bauhaus letterhead designed by Herbert Bayer, (**fig. 72**) an envelope designed by Piet Zwart, (**fig. 73**) a postcard designed by Walter Dexel and a book designed by El Lissitzky. The asymmetry, the colours (black and red), the composition, the choice of typefaces and the paper size are all elements presenting a spirit of the age. Through keeping correspondence with his expansive network, Jan Tschichold functioned as a curator, selecting graphic samples that demonstrated the theory he was forwarding in his publications.

Avant-garde artists and designers often exhibited a sense of mobility, evidenced by their frequent changes of address and the various origins of the correspondence. The political situation in Germany, compounded by the war, prompted many avant-garde artists to emigrate. America emerged as a promising destination where they could continue their work, and the 1930s saw a significant increase in the number of European immigrants to America. A postcard from New York by the French painter Jean Hélion – whose abstract work of the 1930s established him as a leading Modernist and who lived in America in the 1930s – addressed to Tschichold aptly describes the situation. (**figs. 74–75**) He writes: “I am very happy to work in this environment so different from Europe and to get to know people that war problems didn’t affect”.²⁹ The archive also includes letters from Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy, (**fig. 76**) both of whom migrated to the United States. They participated in the creation of new design and art schools that are understood as continuing the legacy of the Bauhaus and in doing so contributed to the dissemination of the New Typography: the New Bauhaus, in Chicago and the Black Mountain College in North Carolina.³⁰ A letter from Josef Albers attests to this continuation. (**fig. 77**) He used the Bauhaus Dessau stationery, on which he ruled out the letterhead and pasted on the information of Black Mountain College in its place.³¹

From New Typography to New Wave

Overall, *Die neue Typographie* found a receptive audience in the United States largely thanks to the integration of European émigrés who became influential figures in American graphic design and advertising.³² American-born designers would also adopt the modern style, imbuing it with their unique approaches.³³ A second wave of European influence arrived in America throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The Swiss Style, a descendant of the New Typography which was developed in neutral Switzerland during World War II, expanded its horizons from Europe to America and Asia and came to be known as the International Style. This style was detached from socialist ideals and was quickly embraced by corporate America.³⁴ Paul Rand, one the most celebrated American modern designers, stated: “When I was first aware of what the

29 Letter and postcards from Jean Hélion, including an aerial view of Manhattan Island, 1931–1935, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Translated from French to English by the author.

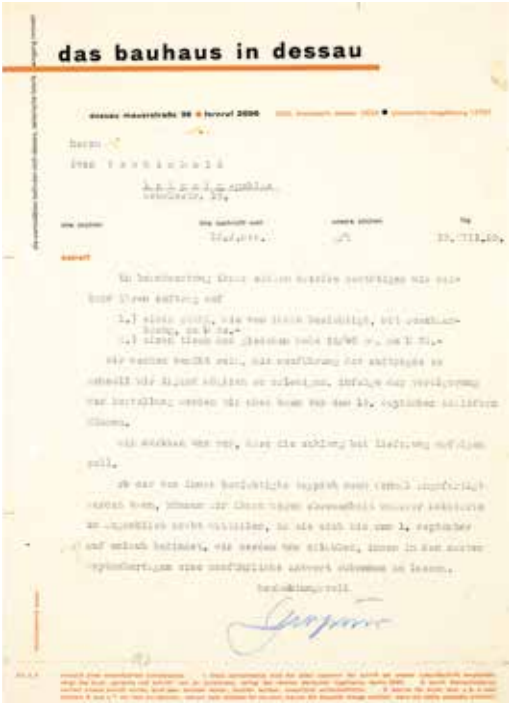
30 Letter from László Moholy-Nagy to Jan Tschichold regarding the New Bauhaus, Chicago, 24 March 1938, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

31 Letter from Joseph Albers using Bauhaus Dessau letterhead, but with the Black Mountain College info glued over to Jan Tschichold, 12 March 1934, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

32 Stirton 2019: 184–185.

33 Heller and D’Onofrio 2017.

34 Eskilson 2012: 286.



72



73



74

- fig. 72
- Letter from Walter Gropius to Jan Tschichold, 17 August 1925.
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
- fig. 73
- Envelope addressed to Jan Tschichold from Piet Zwart, 1930.
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
- fig. 74
- Postcard to Jan Tschichold from Jean Héliou
featuring an aerial view of Manhattan, ca. 1938.
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.



75

fig. 75 Jean Hélon's postcard to Jan Tschichold, 1938.
 Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

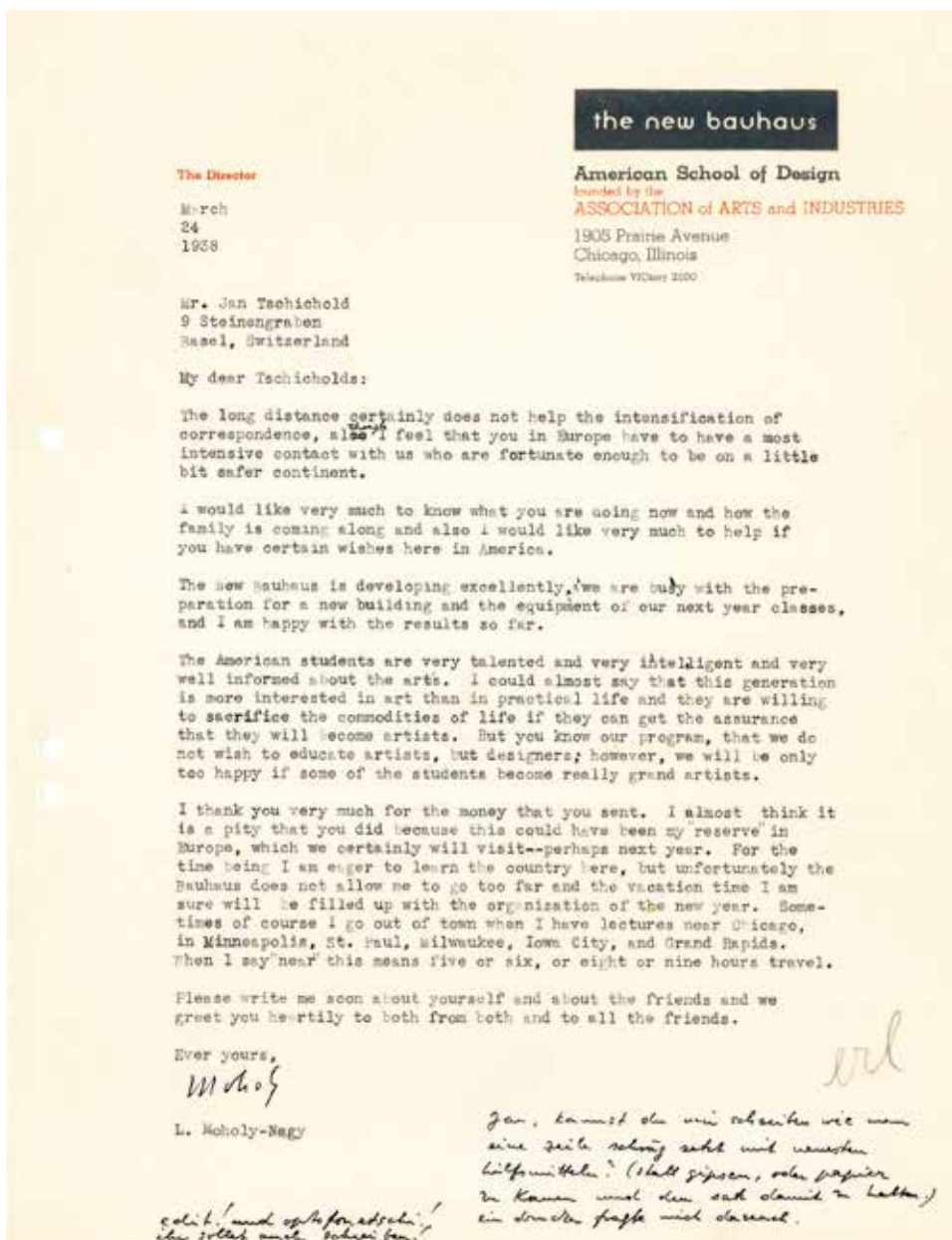
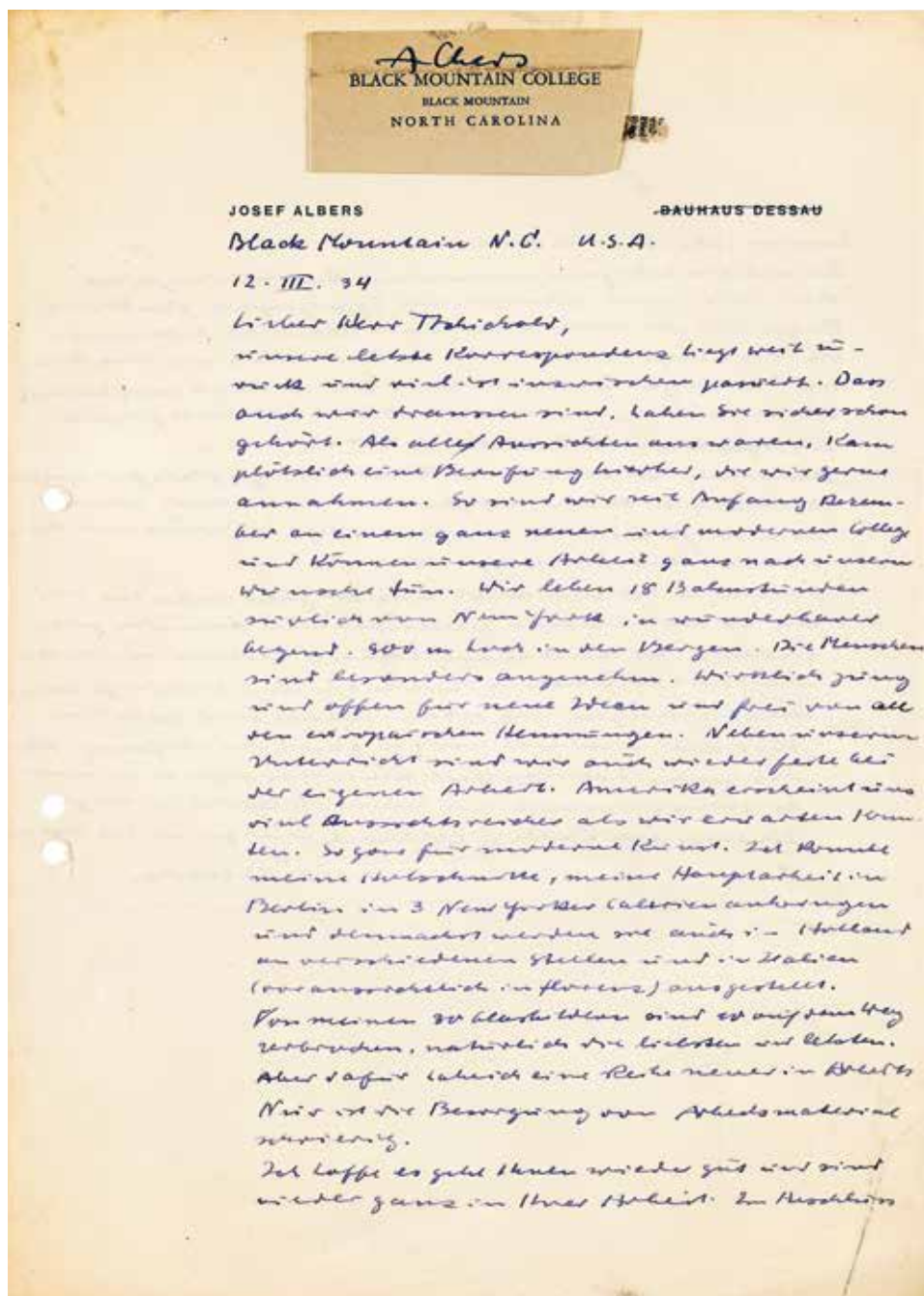


fig. 76 László Moholy-Nagy's letter to Jan Tschichold, 24 March 1938.
 Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



Swiss were doing, I used to ridicule it... But then I changed completely... There is not a counterpart to Swiss design in terms of something that you can describe, that you can follow, that you can systematically understand".³⁵

Though Modernist protagonists were active in California, New York remained the American forefront of design. It was only by the time a third wave arrived from Europe that California came to the fore. In the 1970s, Wolfgang Weingart pioneered innovative typographic designs in Basel, engaging in extensive experimentation within the realm of Swiss typography as a sensible starting point. These burgeoning ideas – arriving in America by way of his American students returning home to the United States – became known as the New Wave.³⁶ The current found fertile ground in the United States, where Los Angeles and New York became the new nuclei of this style. In California, the combination of the latest technology (Apple released the Macintosh personal computer in 1984, which would be followed by an impressive series of technological developments) and the thriving New Wave ideas allowed California to become an international epicentre for avant-garde graphic design and typography. *Émigré* magazine and the work of April Greiman are exemplary of the avant-garde alliance between style and technology in the 1980s and 1990s.

This design-centric identity might have been a motivation for the Getty Research Institute to acquire the Jan and Edith Tschichold papers in 1993, as a means of solidifying this status for Los Angeles. Coincidentally, around the same period, the University of California Press published the first English edition of *The New Typography* in 1995, creating an atmosphere akin to a zeitgeist. Despite the intriguing timing of these two events, it has been confirmed as "purely coincidence",³⁷ leaving lingering questions. Nonetheless, the Institute's collection grew to include Lissitzky, Sutnar, and Zwart archives, in addition to their Bauhaus archives which were already part of their Special Collection.³⁸ To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Jan and Edith Tschichold papers' acquisition, it would become essential to delve into the motivations of the sellers (presumably the family through an antique art dealer³⁹) and to investigate to whom the collection was offered, who were the potential buyers and what the conditions of the transaction were.

Die neue Typographie should be understood as the collective work of like-minded artists and designers. Tschichold wasn't the originator of many of the ideas presented in the book. Even if his role was essential in synthesising and disseminating them, they came from international avant-garde artists and designers who were actively sharing their work.⁴⁰ From this perspective, and understood as a dynamic, interwoven and overlapping history of typography, it seems completely valid that the Edith and Jan Tschichold papers are housed in California. The displacement can be seen instead as a continuation and dissemination of their work to an international audience. Additionally, the Institute is commendably preserving the Tschichold papers in optimal conditions and making them accessible to a diverse audience – an accessibility which

greatly contributes to research and education efforts.

35 Heller 1999: 158.

36 Hollis 2006.

37 Email from Edward Dimendberg to the author, 12 December 2023.

38 Online Archive of California n.d.

39 Email from Alain Moirandat to the author, 18 April 2023.

40 Stirton 2019: 3–4.

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