

# How New is New? Jan Tschichold and the New Typography

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The “new” arises through contrast, requiring something “old” to appear novel. The mention of its conservative opponents is therefore an essential element in the narrative of the New Typography’s ascension. Jan Tschichold wrote in 1930: “The views of the New Typography were the object of savage attack on all sides – today none but a few disgruntled die-hards ever think of raising their voice. The New Typography has won through”.<sup>1</sup> In 1933, László Moholy-Nagy added: “almost without exception, the former opponents have come around and joined us with all flags flying”.<sup>2</sup> But who were these opponents and what were their arguments against the New Typography? And how were they finally convinced? This article focuses on a specific group: the so-called *Buchdrucker* – literally “book printers”, although these practitioners produced a wide range of printed products.<sup>3</sup>

Up to now, the role of the *Buchdrucker* has not been widely acknowledged in the history of graphic design – which is surprising, because they were the forerunners of today’s communication designers. In addition to the actual printing process, their work also included the design of printed materials: layout,

choice of typeface and typesetting.<sup>4</sup> In the common narrative on New Typography, they are at best generically categorised as conservative sceptics or even opponents of New Typography, who needed to be convinced of the value of the “new”.<sup>5</sup> This assessment is not entirely wrong, and indeed many *Buchdrucker* expressed sharp-tongued and condescending criticism of New Typography.<sup>6</sup> However, they were also some of its most ardent supporters and contributed significantly to the success of the movement. How and why will be explained below.

## In Favour of the New – Promoting the New Typography

The first notable reception of the New Typography among the *Buchdrucker* came in 1925 with the special issue “Elementare Typographie” (Elementary Typography), which was compiled and designed by Tschichold.<sup>7</sup> (fig. 78) It appeared as the October issue of

1 Tschichold 1930a: 7. Translation taken from Bierut et al. 1999: 47.

2 Moholy-Nagy 1933: 2.

3 This essay is based on the doctoral thesis *Neuer Blick auf die neue Typographie: die Rezeption der Avantgarde in der Fachwelt der 1920er Jahre* (New Perspectives on the New Typography: The Reception of the avant-garde in Professional Circles in the 1920s) and draws primarily on an analysis of trade journals of the time (Meer 2015). The analysis is based on a study of trade journals for *Buchdrucker* from the years 1924–1933, including *Archiv für Buchgewerbe und Gebrauchsgraphik*, *The Fleuron*, *Der graphische Betrieb*, *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, *Jungbuchdrucker*, *Klimschs Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Druckereien*, *Klimschs Jahrbuch*, *Korrespondent*, *Offset*, *Buch- und Werbekunst*, *Typographische Mitteilungen*, *Zeitschrift für Deutschlands Buchdrucker*.

4 Meer 2015: 84–90, and for more detail Von der Vring 1965.

5 Leu 1986: 1.

6 Meer 2015: 91–104.

7 *Typographische Mitteilungen* 1925. Among the professional circles of *Buchdrucker*, Jan Tschichold’s publication *Die neue Typographie* by no means marks the culmination of attention to the New Typography and is therefore not the focus of this article.



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fig. 78 Cover of “Elementare Typographie”, special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, October 1925, edited and designed by Jan Tschichold.  
Photo by Vincent Levrat

*Typographische Mitteilungen*, the official communication organ of the Bildungsverband Deutscher Buchdrucker (Educational Association of German Book Printers). This sub-group was responsible for education and training within the central professional association of printers in Germany. The fact that so much prominence was given to the New Typography highlights the fact that influential supporters of the movement already numbered among the association's ranks in 1925.

In the years that followed, New Typography became a central theme and the authors of *Typographische Mitteilungen* made a concerted effort to introduce their more conservative colleagues to modern design ideas. An especially patent example is the fictitious conversation between a progressive and a conservative printer that featured in the fourth 1926 issue.<sup>8</sup> The positive qualities of New Typography are mentioned alongside the objections. In the end, neither of the opposing viewpoints overcame the other, however the dialogue-based presentation helped to mitigate New Typography's radical reputation. By weighing and acknowledging the objections, conservative printers were given the opportunity to open up to the new ideas; the article is notably less dogmatic and confrontational than the manifestos of the New Typographers.

Another communication strategy adopted by the *Typographische Mitteilungen* can be seen in the attempts to provide relevance. Printed over four issues, the compilation of "Voices from the Professional World" on the subject of New Typography, for example, gives the impression that discussions in professional circles from 1925 onwards were dominated by the movement.<sup>9</sup> In its subsequent issues, the *Typographische Mitteilungen* also refers to several publications on the New Typography as well as lectures and exhibitions.<sup>10</sup> In these articles, the editors overtly advocated the New Typography with only a few exceptions. While the authors of other journals took a negative stand towards the movement, *Typographische Mitteilungen* explicitly addressed the faulty reasoning behind their arguments.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the mediating role of the articles, the open support for New Typography is also evident in the printed work and design of the journal. Most trade journals published so-called "typesetting specimens" featuring exemplary works. Those included in *Typographische Mitteilungen* often embrace the design principles of New Typography; they are formally reduced and characterised by the use of abstracted and geometric shapes, diagonals, photographs and dynamic white space. From 1926 onwards, more such typesetting specimens regularly appeared in *Typographische Mitteilungen*; as of June 1927, the journal was published in a Modernised layout; and after 1929, many articles were typeset in all lower case.

In 1930, the editors provided a further incentive to engage with the New Typography. From the May issue onwards, the editorial staff – explicitly aiming to promote modern typography – defined design tasks for contexts that were to be worked on in the style of the movement. The tasks related to the design

of everyday printed matter, such as a book title and a double page spread in DIN A5 format for two books with different contents. This series of tasks was justified with the explanation that New Typography was "not yet as widespread as would be desirable".<sup>12</sup>

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| 8  | <i>Typographische Mitteilungen</i> 1926a.                      |
| 9  | <i>Typographische Mitteilungen</i> 1926b, 1926c, 1926d, 1926e. |
| 10 | <i>Typographische Mitteilungen</i> 1927, 1928; Sarmatzki 1927. |
| 11 | Schuster 1928.                                                 |
| 12 | Schuster 1930.                                                 |
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In September 1930, the printers were even asked to educate their clientele in matters of taste, because only then would customers learn to distinguish good works (meaning, works designed in the style of the New Typography) from bad ones.<sup>13</sup>

These remarks demonstrate that the New Typography did not in fact face widespread opposition among the *Buchdrucker*, but instead could claim many influential and adamant supporters. Thus, the question arises: why were the *Buchdrucker* such dedicated supporters of the New Typography?

A key reason is that the *Buchdrucker* were under tremendous pressure in the 1920s. Mechanisation and automation threatened jobs and wage levels.<sup>14</sup> In addition, they faced growing competition from so-called *Gebruchsgrafiker* (commercial graphic designers) an emerging profession specialising in the design of illustrative advertising posters, advertisements and other applied graphics, which overlapped with the activities of the printers. Commissions in the field of advertising, in particular, were increasingly awarded to this group of professionals rather than to the *Buchdrucker*, as the printing process of colour lithography became more affordable in the 1920s and many clients wanted to make use of the advertising appeal of the drawn motifs. These were difficult to reproduce using the letterpress technique employed by the *Buchdrucker*. Photographs, on the other hand, could be easily reproduced, as could type and coloured bars – in other words, the very elements of New Typography.

The advocacy of the New Typography must therefore also be viewed against the backdrop of competition with graphic artists. The New Typographers demanded designs that dispensed with drawings, handwriting, and the simultaneous use of many colours in a single motif – everything that could be better produced using lithographic printing processes than with letterpress printing. As the *Buchdrucker* Heinrich Grote stated plainly: “elementary typography has shown practitioners new possibilities and given them the opportunity to test their skills in unexpected ways”.<sup>15</sup>

### The New New Typography – Adapting and Transforming New Typography

However, the *Buchdrucker* by no means adopted the New Typography without criticism. In particular, the early reactions of such printers to the New Typography were accompanied by disparaging remarks about the quality of the craftsmanship and typography of the works. It was said of El Lissitzky and his design of *Pro dva kvadrata. Suprematicheskii skaz v 6-ti postroikakh* (About Two Squares. A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions) for example, that the “typographic material was being alarmingly butchered”.<sup>16</sup> The avant-garde typeface designer and author Paul Renner opined that the New Typographers often introduced good ideas, but understood nothing about the technical aspects.<sup>17</sup> In its early form, moreover, New Typography was only deemed suitable for a narrow range of commissions – for the advertising subjects “emanating from a similar spirit” such as industrial products, but not for music, dance and the like.<sup>18</sup>

Based on this criticism – and their accumulated expertise in typography and often also in advertising – the *Buchdrucker* further developed the New Typography style. The works printed in *Typographische Mitteilun-*

13 *Typographische Mitteilungen* 1930.

14 Von der Vring 1965: 324–332.

15 Grote 1930: 20.

16 Bauer 1925: 2.

17 Renner 1930: 8.

18 Leonhardt 1926: 76. He made the same statements in early 1925, in relation to Schwitters' “Theses on Typography”. Leonhardt 1925.

gen and other journals were strongly influenced by the movement, but differ considerably from the avant-garde works that appeared, for example, in the special issue "Elementare Typographie". (**fig. 79**) The design is finer in composition and colouring and stands out from the radical early form of the New Typography through the precise letter spacing of the typefaces and the clear influence of classical design principles. In addition to sans serif typefaces, Antiqua variants were employed, especially in classical and italicised formats. Furthermore, there was a "calming of the world of forms, a tendency towards modest manifestations", as Tschichold himself noted in 1930.<sup>19</sup> Diagonals are used, but typography is never arranged vertically. There are neither bold bars nor heavy squares or dominant arrows. Larger areas of colour are often reduced in intensity through raster screens. (**figs. 80–81**) The combination of image and text elements also appears more coherent, often creating the illusion of space. This visibly expanded the applications for New Typography; perfumes, soap, luxury products and certainly also music and dance could be advertised with this further adapted version of New Typography. (**figs. 82–83**) In 1998, Christopher Burke called the design a "flexible adaptation of the Modernist style to suit a variety of commercial printing tasks".<sup>20</sup>

This further development was decisive in the increasing acceptance of the New Typography. In the *Klimschs Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Druckereien* (Klimsch's General Gazette for Printers), for example, the author is "convinced that elementary typography will become more and more accepted [...] when it has freed itself from certain exaggerations and confusions of the initial period".<sup>21</sup> The "matured" form of New Typography supplies the "presently rather sterile advertising typography of the daily and trade press with valuable suggestions, [...] so that it is certainly worth the time for every businessman to take a closer look".<sup>22</sup> It becomes clear that many of the alleged opponents of New Typography contributed significantly to its acceptance – both through their instructive journalistic campaigns and their design competence. So, what role did Jan Tschichold play in this constellation?

### Jan Tschichold and the New Typography

Konrad Friedrich Bauer, director of the Bauersche Schriftgiesserei (Bauer Type Foundry), called "Elementare Typographie" the "first summarising presentation" of the New Typography. This assessment is only partially correct in view of the numerous publications issued by the protagonists of the New Typography themselves (e.g., the advertising issue of the *Merz* journal in 1924), but it is proof that the publications of the avant-garde were either scarcely considered or went entirely unnoticed by the *Buchdrucker*. Periodicals such as *De Stijl* or *Merz* and books such as the *Die Kunstismen* (The Isms of Art) or the *Buch neuer Künstler* (The Book of New Artists) were primarily received in avant-garde art circles. The 1923 Bauhaus exhibition in Weimar made the New Typography accessible to a broader public, but addressed those interested in art rather than advertising and printing professionals.

The special issue "Elementare Typographie" can therefore be considered a turning point in the development of the New Typography. It was read not only by the artistic avant-garde, but also by members

<sup>19</sup> Tschichold 1930b: 1801.

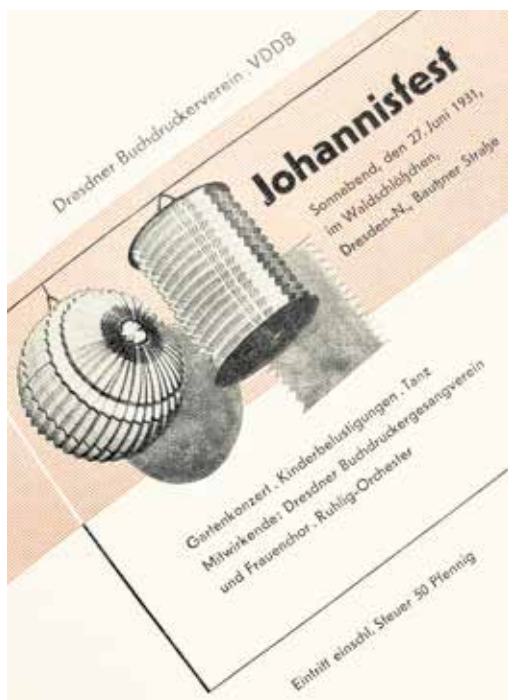
<sup>20</sup> Burke 1998: 63.

<sup>21</sup> Hartmann 1930. The trade journal *Korrespondent* (Correspondent) was also of the opinion that "the beginnings of New Typography [...] were more off-putting than encouraging" (Zeh 1932: 7).

<sup>22</sup> Hebsacker 1927: 376.



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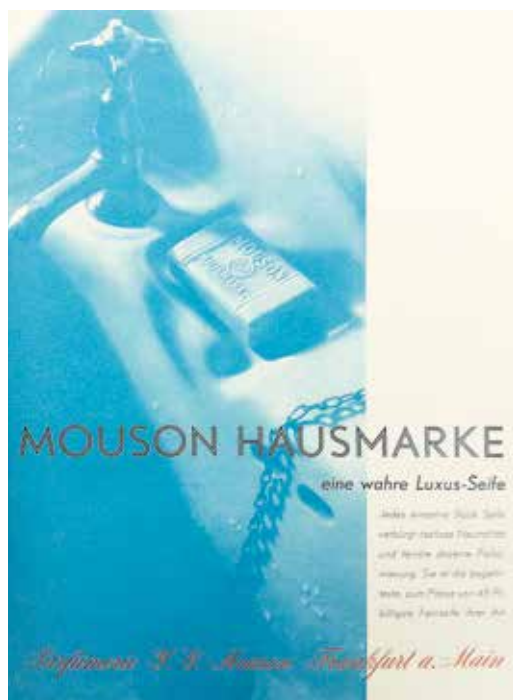
fig. 79 Works shown on the pages of "Elementare Typographie", special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, October 1925, edited and designed by Jan Tschichold.  
Photo by Vincent Levrat

fig. 80 Example of the later form of the New Typography: advertisement for the 1929 Midsummer Party organised by the Dresden Letterpress Association, from *Typographische Mitteilungen*, 2, February 1929.

fig. 81 Type specimen of Berthold-Grotesk, designed by Georg Trumpp, from *Gebrauchsgraphik*, 10, 1930.



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fig. 82 Example of advertising for luxury products and cosmetics in the latest style of New Typography, 1932.



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fig. 83 Example of the latest form of New Typography: advertising for a jewellery brand, from *Typographische Mitteilungen*, 5, May 1932.

of the Verein Deutscher Buchdrucker (Association of German Book Printers), and thus by a broad group of professional typographers and printers. Furthermore, the special issue functioned as the starting point for New Typography's entry into the training institutions for *Buchdrucker*, as the *Typographische Mitteilungen* served as the communication platform of the trade association's educational wing, the Bildungsverband Deutscher Buchdrucker (Educational Association of German Book Printers).

But why, in comparison, did the publications of other New Typographers go largely or entirely unnoticed in professional circles? One reason is certainly the publication of the special issue "Elementare Typographie" as the October issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*. It was part of the routinely read professional literature – many book printers received the *Typographische Mitteilungen* by subscription – while the other publications of the avant-garde were easily overlooked. But Tschichold also attained recognition in the professional world beyond the educational association, as evidenced by the number of journal articles he wrote and the numerous requests for lectures, as well as the success of his textbooks. Among the most important of these are *Die neue Typographie* (1928) and *Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung – Grundbegriffe der neuen Typografie in Bildbeispielen für Setzer, Werbefachleute, Drucksachenverbraucher und Bibliophile* (A Lesson in Print Design – Basic Concepts of New Typography in Visual Examples for Typesetters, Advertising Professionals, Print Consumers and Bibliophiles, 1930).

Tschichold also wrote two books especially for training schools: *Schriftschreiben für Setzer* (Lettering and Calligraphy for Typesetters, 1931) and *Typografische Entwurfstechnik* (Techniques of Typographic Design, 1932). In addition to the already sympathetic book printers, the Verband Deutscher Reklamefachleute (Association of German Advertisers) also reviewed the book very positively. In the journal *Die Reklame* (Advertising) published by the association, the book is recommended for "reading in its entirety" and the association's news sheet also had words of praise. Even the type designer Rudolf Koch, who had been criticised by Tschichold, said: "The whole booklet makes a mature, very well-educated impression and is highly instructive for everyone, not only for typesetters".

But what qualified Tschichold to serve as a "mouthpiece"<sup>23</sup> for New Typography? In addition to his established commitment as a publicist, lecturer and teacher, it was his style of language and attitude that distinguished him from other avant-gardists and predestined him for the role of mediator in communicating with professionals. For one thing, Tschichold chose a comprehensible mode of expression. El Lissitzky wrote cryptically of "topography of typography" and "pressure and tension of textual content"; likewise, Kurt Schwitters formulated sentences of questionable content and comprehensibility. Ise Gropius noted in her diary in 1924: "In the afternoon, desperate efforts to read Moholy's stage essay. It is all expressed in such a complicated manner that no layperson will understand the writing".<sup>24</sup> Tschichold, on the other hand, enumerates in plain language the characteristics of the New Typography. The *Klimschs Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Druckereien* states that Tschichold "fortunately [refrains] from

those unpleasantly exaggerated formulations familiarly used in similar publications".<sup>25</sup> Tschichold focused on formal aspects in his texts, while

23 Lewis 1977: 50.

24 Tagebuch Ise Gropius (Diary of Ise Gropius), 7 September 1924, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin (unpublished).

utopian superstructure and ambitions to change society took a secondary role.<sup>26</sup> He neither wrote of the “New Man”, nor did he justify the advantages of photography over drawing with a “New Perception”. Tschichold limited himself to arguments relevant to book printers and explained the New Typography with applications in mind, not as an ideology.

A comparison with other programmatic texts reveals how Tschichold constructed his texts with a clear eye toward the target group of professionals. Most of the programmatic texts of the New Typographers were not conceived as educational texts; the aim was not to enable readers to design according to the precepts of the New Typography. Rather, the authors wanted to demonstrate the significance and correctness of their own artistic position and preferred design elements and stylistic devices: László Moholy-Nagy – author of the book *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Painting, Photography, Film) – always emphasises the potential of photography and film in his texts, and El Lissitzky in turn – painter of the *Proun* series – focused on “tensions” in the division of surfaces, while the early texts of the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters show a clear affinity for to the *Merz* art he developed, in which the combination of different materials plays a central role. Later, Schwitters – the author of the *Ursonate* (original sonata) – concentrated on language and rhythm. The varying format, irregular appearance and changing subjects in the *Merz* journal that he edited also underline the fact that Schwitters’ aim was not informative reporting. Rather, he used the publication to create a forum for topics that interested him – which occasionally extended to advertising, as documented in the 11th issue of *Merz*.<sup>27</sup>

Tschichold, on the other hand, aimed at an enduring and practice-oriented examination of typography. His texts are structured accordingly and formulated in a comprehensible way. Not surprisingly, Tschichold’s theses were reprinted, quoted, paraphrased and used as references far more often than other texts. Even authors critical of the avant-garde, such as Rudolf Engel-Hardt, cited the theses formulated by Tschichold and his “manifesto”<sup>28</sup> printed in the special issue as having a particularly strong influence on the reception of the New Typography – so much so that until the late 1920s, many outsiders reduced the New Typography to Tschichold’s theses. Similarly incisive and application-oriented texts, such as Willi Baumeister’s essay “Neue Typographie” (New Typography), were also cited.<sup>29</sup>

In correlation to the practice-oriented focus of his texts, Tschichold identified himself as a typographer,<sup>30</sup> not as an artist. He repeatedly demonstrated to be an experienced practitioner expressing a detailed

knowledge of the printing process.<sup>31</sup> In demonstrating detail and expertise, he set himself apart from the other New Typographers who were self-taught. The latter were often rejected by professional printers as “intruders” who – according to the accusation – demanded designs that were “tastefully deviant” and “technically impossible” due to their lack of practical experience.<sup>32</sup> Although Tschichold had never worked full-time as a printer, he

25 Newspaper clipping, n.d., *Estate of Jan Tschichold*, Box NLTsch 88/59, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Leipzig.

26 Tschichold 1925.

27 Haldenwanger 1990.

28 Tschichold 1925.

29 Baumeister 1926. For example, he was cited in Zahn 1926.

30 Although the professional group of “typographers” was not yet established at that time, the first references to them can be found in the gazettes of the Bund Deutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker (Association of German Graphic Artists, Knodel 1927).

31 Tschichold 1930c: 236.

32 Kolb 1930; Meer 2015: 91–104.

was much more familiar with the work of book printers than artists such as László Moholy-Nagy or Kurt Schwitters. His typographic training made him familiar with the discussions on the subject and he mastered the language of the *Buchdrucker*. The intensity of Tschichold's efforts to integrate himself into the trade can be seen in the body of holdings from Tschichold's Estate at the German National Library in Leipzig. The Estate contains an extensive collection of newspaper articles on new techniques, printing processes such as multi-colour rotary printing and mechanical typesetting, as well as articles on the cooperation between printers and bookbinders.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Tschichold was well versed in the needs of the printing trade – and the professionals were, in their own words, glad “to have this artist at work within our walls”.<sup>34</sup>

It ended badly for both parties. Even with the aid of the New Typography, the *Buchdrucker* failed in defending the creative aspects of their work from the invading *Gebrauchsgrafiker*. Today there is a clear differentiation between “design” as the domain of graphic designers and “production” as the purview of printers. And in the end, Tschichold also “lost”. He succeeded in helping New Typography become known and widely established – but the movement now overshadowed his own professional evolution over the ensuing decades. Despite all his subsequent attempts to distance himself, his name is irrevocably associated with New Typography.<sup>35</sup> His later works are far less known and celebrated. A key reason for this is the enduring prominence of *Die neue Typographie* and other relevant publications to the survival of New Typography, including in Swiss typography. *Die neue Typographie* did not allow itself to be silenced, not even by its author.

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33 Collection of newspaper clippings and texts,  
Estate of Jan Tschichold, Box NLTsch 3,  
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Leipzig.

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34 Watzal 1927.

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35 Cf. Bosshard 2012.

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*Typographische Mitteilungen* 1926e

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