

Type writer

Telling the intoxicating story of fonts

NANCY CAMPBELL

Simon Loxley

TYPE IS BEAUTIFUL

The story of fifty remarkable fonts
262pp. Bodleian Library, £20 (US \$35).
978 1 85124 431 7

staple of medieval scholarship ever since Johan Huizinga's classic *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919). The exhibition could have done more to explore this theme: as it is, the final section on "Colour and Meaning" feels a little perfunctory, though Deirdre Jackson's accompanying essay in the catalogue supplies some useful background. Jackson rightly emphasizes the complexity of medieval colour theory, and the diversity of meanings attached to particular colours. "Red could evoke a flower's petals, Christ's wounds, a lover's lips, the dawn sky, an angry countenance, the flames of hell, the power of the Holy Spirit and the blood of martyrs". Yet the curators stop short of engaging with Huizinga's influential, but problematic, suggestion that bright colours appealed to a naive and childlike aspect of the medieval mind. This is an exhibition that tends to reinforce, rather than revise, popular assumptions about the Middle Ages.

In a show full of gold and glitter, it may seem perverse to single out the darkest objects for special notice. But for me, the exhibits that left the most lasting impression were a set of five grisaille illustrations from a sixteenth-century manuscript of Jacques le Lieur's *Poème sur la Passion*. Framed together on one wall, they appear from a distance as solid rectangles of black, like tiny Rothko paintings. The manuscript they come from was sold as recently as 1983 and subsequently broken up (a practice still far too common); since then, the Fitzwilliam has made a gallant effort to reassemble it by buying individual images as they reappear on the market. Technical analysis suggests that the miniatures are the work of different hands: one, by the Master of Girard Acarie, uses animosity black, while the others, probably by his assistants, use the less expensive carbon black. It is a triumphant vindication of the Fitzwilliam's collecting policy and the scientific research underpinning this exhibition.

Together, book and exhibition prompt one to reflect on the future of medieval manuscripts in a digital age. De Hamel takes delight in the physical and tactile aspects of the manuscripts he handles. Running his finger down the vellum leaves of the *Carmina Burana*, he pronounces that it feels Austrian: "the smooth pages have a southern feel to the touch, unlike the more suede-like texture of German parchment". In the case of the Codex Amiatinus, he claims to be able to localize the manuscript purely by smell. "There is a curious warm leathery smell to English parchment, unlike the sharper, cooler scent of Italian skins." In this spirit, he urges his readers to see and handle the objects for themselves. Curators, he is confident, will be sympathetic. "We all know secretly that there is no substitute for actually encountering the originals face to face."

Yet even de Hamel has to admit that many of the world's greatest manuscripts are already practically inaccessible. "It is easier to meet the Pope or the President of the United States than it is to touch the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry." It is by no means unlikely that the present generation of academics and post-graduates will be the last to work with originals rather than digital surrogates. Medieval manuscripts will become prisoners of the strong-room, released, if at all, only on rare occasions for special exhibitions. Christopher de Hamel makes an eloquent case for their continued accessibility. But his book offers a glimpse behind the curtain at a world that most of us will never see.

In *The Crystal Goblet* (1955) the type historian Beatrice Warde writes that "almost all the virtues of the perfect wineglass have a parallel in typography". Although a solid gold flagon may be impressive, she continues, only a crystal goblet will reveal "the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain": the wine itself. I suspect Warde's metaphor may have been inspired by the lavish dinners engaged in by her fellow typophiles, a group (in my experience) not known for abstemiousness.

Simon Loxley, who uses Warde's words as the epigraph to *Type is Beautiful*, would be an engaging companion at such a dinner. He wears his knowledge of typography lightly, with a frame of reference that ranges from Sherlock Holmes to spaghetti westerns. This selection of fifty fonts introduces the rivalries, ambitions and principles that have driven the profession from the fifteenth century to the present day. It takes the reader from the origins of printing with movable type through developments designed to keep pace with the demands of mechanization in modern publishing, and culminates in the digital revolution.

The last decade has seen a growing interest in typography. *Helvetica* (2007), the feature-length film about a single typeface, was followed by Simon Garfield's bestseller *Just My Type* (2011). *Helvetica* also features in Loxley's Top 50, and a few other fonts overlap with those in Garfield's narrative, such as the inextinguishable Comic Sans. The classics that one would expect to find in the typocracks of every letterpress printshop (Caslon, Bodoni, etc) are considered here alongside relative newcomers (Futura). There is a good balance of text and display faces, with the latter adding a note of exuberance, whether the intricate engraved floral motifs of Pouchée's 18 Line No.2 from the 1820s or the sinister drips decorating the 1970s font Bloody Hell.

Good type may be transparent, but it is far from ingenuous. Examples of successful rebranding of a corporate identity through type include the "friendly" font family designed for NatWest in 1993 and the typeface "with a killer quirk" commissioned by Channel 4 in 2004. Sometimes an existing typeface is commandeered for commercial ends, as in the boisterous case of Cooper Black, now used (in lower-case orange) to express the ethos of easyGroup. And associations linger: Hitler declared Fraktur to be the true German typeface; the heavy blackletter fonts, which trace their origins to the sixteenth century, have been associated with the Third Reich ever since.

That typefaces can improve communication and thereby change lives is demonstrated by Louise Braille's typeface for the blind,



inspired by the *écriture nocturne* developed by Napoleon's army to exchange messages silently in the dark. Even today, design is used to reinvigorate linguistic communities: the endangered North American language Lushootseed was traditionally typeset in an adapted version of Times, but the designer Juliet Chen felt that this failed to reflect the "graceful" sounds of the language. Sure enough, the redesign of the type in 2008 generated a surge of interest in Lushootseed.

This fine book on letterforms tells some familiar stories in new ways, and has the hallmarks of a classic which will be quoted from in turn. Like Warde, Loxley has a gift for metaphor. Noting the tendency of fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Tatler* to use Modern faces in their titles, he suggests such fonts are

akin to simple yet elegant evening dress. By comparison, the Times family, designed for the newspaper in 1932 (and in which this page is set) is "essentially a robust, two-fisted hired hand in the unsentimental world of newspaper production... [which] never had pretensions to be anything other than a demizen of Fleet Street, and subsequently 'Wapping'".

As well as typefaces favoured by the establishment and its graphic designers, this selection encompasses fonts in "vernacular" usage such as Cloister Black, the improbable choice of tandooris and tattooists. Presented with this abundance of potential drinking vessels, from the crystal goblet to everyday tempered glassware, Loxley's readers may be forgiven for reaching the last pages of *Type is Beautiful* feeling rather intoxicated.

INSTITUTE OF
ENGLISH
STUDIES

SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

MA/MRes in the History of the Book

The *MA in the History of the Book* is an unparalleled multidisciplinary opportunity to study the Book's influence on cultural and intellectual change, while making use of the resources of central London. Students take two required courses (The Medieval Book, The Printed Book in Britain) and select from several option courses, including an internship at a London bookselling firm. Tutors are leading experts in their fields, and classes take place in Senate House Library, the British Library, Lambeth Palace Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and other institutions.

One-third course work, two-thirds research, the *MRes in the History of the Book* allows a greater degree of specialism for those who are already drawn to a particular topic or period.

Tel: +44 (0)20 7862 8679
Email: iesMA@sas.ac.uk

Follow us on: twitter.com/@IES_London

ies.sas.ac.uk