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PERSONAL NOTES ON DESIGN: What kind of design for modern printing? How approach the problems of modern design in all fields? These questions open up delightful vistas of argument and endless potentials for disagreement. Rather than present an elaborate and carefully worked out theory I would reverse the process and try to track down the instinctive, the quite often unconscious, development which leads one later to feel that such a theory is necessary. I have found that all positions men take in their beliefs are profoundly influenced by thousands of small, often imperceptible experiences that slowly accumulate to form a sum total of choices and decisions. Rational and logical explanations for these are developed long after the basic work has been done. When we find statistics and logic to support our

position we are only too delighted to use them with the self-assurance that our development was a reasoned one.

Therefore I will not answer such questions by saying, "Why of course there should be *modern* design for *modern* printing, because after all we live in the twentieth century and we must find forms to satisfy our needs and we must learn to use the machine, and handcraftsmanship is dead, etc." These arguments have been around for many years, and they are just as valid now as they were when first announced. Yet some people continue to reject them or at best give them a nod and then continue on their traditional path.

Rather than rail at this blindness I would like to trace the steps, the experiences and emotional decisions that bring one to the point of *being* a "modern" rather than a "traditional" designer. I hope the reader will forgive me if this becomes personal, but tracing this kind of organic development is very vital. The stern face of deep need, of inner necessity, still operates and reveals its presence or its lack in every kind of work, traditional or modern.

In times like ours when we are presented with a vast spectacle of disintegration and regeneration, the very time of one's birth and immediate influences automatically have a tremendous effect on personal destiny. The relationship to tradition, the sense of security or insecurity automatically start a chain of selection in operation. If one had been born around the turn of the century, on the Eastern seaboard, of polite and comfortable parents with some pretensions to culture, it would not be difficult to believe in a secure world, with all the traditional values and forms in their proper place. As little as fifteen to

twenty years ago it was still easy to dismiss the ferment and change that were taking place as mere foolishness; and many did. On the other hand, if one had been born (as I was) in 1915, in the Far West, of comfortable parents but with absolutely no pretensions to culture, and never exposed to any of the great symbols of European civilization except at second hand and by reproduction, one would be apt to have a very different attitude toward tradition—if any at all. Nothing around me, except music or literature, could give a clue to the grandeur that had been European Civilization.

My first exposure to art took place in high school, where an enlightened teacher, to the scorn of her fellow instructors, showed her students modern painting, sculpture and architecture, with a liberal sprinkling of European posters. Something happened. This art hit a fresh eye, unencumbered by any ideas of what art was or should be, and found an immediate sympathetic response. Why it struck my eye as alive and wonderful, and had no effect on other eyes around me, I will not try to explain. This miracle of response is something that either does or does not happen every day. In my case, as in others, the visual response was first; the explanation as to intent came later. This ability to "see" freshly, unencumbered by preconceived verbal, literary or moral ideas, is the first step in responding to most modern art. The inability to respond directly to the vitality of forms is a curious phenomenon and one that people of our country suffer from to a surprising degree.

Thus I belonged to that younger group that was born modern. My first exposure to art was in terms that rejected tradition or at least an academic understanding of it. For me, when tra-

dition was finally discovered, and understood with more maturity, it was always measured against the vitality of the new forms; and when it was found lacking, it was rejected. I still find this a rather handy device.

As I have grown older I have found that the forms that relate to the vitality of the present turn out most often to be the greater treasures of the past. For example, a page from the Gutenberg Bible does a great deal more to me than any page of Caslon type. The Book of Kells is still a great esthetic experience, whereas tons of polite title-pages of the last two centuries add up to zero for me. Certainly this is a very different way of approaching tradition than the more usual one of painfully crawling from the past to the present, and inevitably finding it lacking in relation to the richness of the past.

As instinctive decisions slowly develop and acquire support from other people and from ideas of a related nature, a system of response and action develops that makes you a specific individual with your own concept of reality. You will find delight where another finds ugliness. You will see order where another sees chaos. You will see clarity and elegance where another sees only barrenness and sterility. The lines of communication are down and verbal efforts to hurtle the gap are usually inadequate. Why this should happen at this particular moment in history I will not go into; nevertheless, it is happening. History makes stern decisions as to validity: despite cries of "insane" from the traditionalists or "bourgeois decadence" from the leftists, the new vision is inexorably finding its proper place.

The gulf that can exist between people who superficially seem to be interested in the same things can be enormous. I

clearly remember an experience of ten years ago. An organization in the West made up of rather bookish printers and typographers, was honoring with a luncheon a very distinguished American printer whose name you would all recognize. I had been seated at the side of this gentleman, and was perhaps years his junior. We had a vague, pleasant conversation and I could see that he was saying to himself, "Isn't it nice that such intelligent young men are attracted to the art of printing." But at one point during the luncheon, someone mentioned the fact that I was the designer of a certain book he had shown to the honored guest earlier. This book was very "modern" and broke many of the rules of classic typography. The effect of this announcement was frightening. The distinguished visitor's face went white and he stared at me as though he had just realized that I had leprosy. There was no further conversation!

This violent reaction hurt me at the time, as I was still sensitive to the almost total rejection of modern work that still existed in the book world of ten years ago. I am now no longer hurt; but I have often wondered if the distinguished guest, who since has died, would have ever been able to accept the fact that a new tradition was evolving, and that its concepts were for me as valid as those he stood for were for him.

If we accept the fact that the new principles of design have begun to find a valid and meaningful place in many areas of our life, what is the next step? Like all revolutionaries, the modern designers have always been a little self-conscious and even defensive. Now that the battle shows signs of being won, it is time to re-examine the situation. As is always the case with revolutionaries, a few have reversed themselves completely. A man

like Tschichold, after evolving some of the basic tenets of modern typography, has decided that he is all wrong and has reverted to a kind of conservatism that outdoes the traditionalists. We will not go into the psychology of the turncoat, but it is sufficient to say that the mentality capable of this kind of action certainly is not an example of the deeply-felt inner necessity we spoke of earlier. It is a peculiarly European performance, a direct outgrowth of the manifesto-spawning character of many European art activities. It is inconceivable that a personality like Frank Lloyd Wright would suddenly announce that he had been wrong and henceforth would build only in the classic style!

I think we can safely say that in all the arts, the last fifty years have been characterized by analysis and experiment. Every field of plastic expression has shown among its more vital minds a feverish concern for the new, the never-done-before, the furiously nontraditional. The industrial, social, moral, and economic upheavals that caused this attitude to develop are well known to us all. It seems to me that the second half of this century will be devoted to giving these new forms more authority. We will devote our activities more toward synthesis than invention. We have almost come to a point where we feel that unless something is entirely new it is automatically noncreative. The ability to select, to find the truly organic solution, rather than the preconceived one or the never-done-before one, becomes more and more desirable. I think we are learning slowly how to come to terms with tradition without forsaking any of our own new basic principles. Indeed I believe you can instantly tell the work of a designer who has been at home with modern principles for at least ten years by a certain ease in his work, an

ability to play and to relax from rigidity and self-consciousness.

As we become more mature we will learn to master the interplay between the past and the present and not be so self-conscious of our rejection or acceptance of tradition. We will not make the mistake that both rigid modernists and conservatives make, of confusing the quality of form with the specific forms themselves. This re-examination has been going on now for years in modern architecture and there is no reason why it should not come to printing.

When this process has developed a little further, we will never have to ask ourselves "What kind of design for printing?" We will simply solve each problem within its own terms, without conscious thought concerning "styles," modern or traditional. When this happens we will be mid-stream in a new and living tradition.

← please
read
even though
it is
crossed out!

CONTEMPORARY BOOK DESIGN: By contemporary, we do not mean books produced in our time, but rather books that reflect the basic esthetic concepts peculiar to our time. In this sense contemporary book design is still a rarity. This rareness is not difficult to explain. The long and noble tradition of the book had an uninterrupted development until the beginning of the twentieth century, when suddenly it was confronted by tremendous technical changes and new esthetic principles both of which it was ill prepared to absorb.

Its roots in handicrafts, its adherence to classic symmetrical methods of arrangement, and its commitment to the Roman letter form made book designing, of all the visual arts, the one least able to understand the esthetic and technical changes of