The *Golden Age* of Hand Lettering in American Advertising

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Nick Shinn

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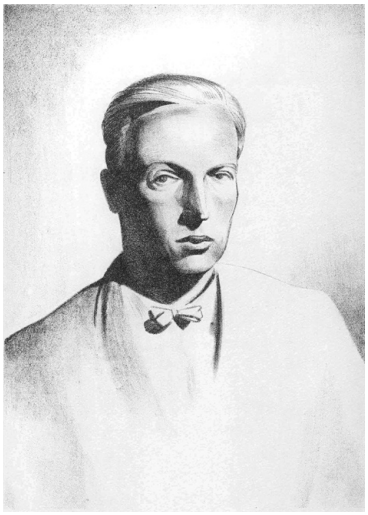
IN 1882 when Harley Procter put a wrapper around a bulk product, branded it Ivory Soap, and placed ads for it in *Ladies Home Journal,* he created consumer culture. This is a gross simplification, but that's the way it worked. Ad revenue dropped the price of magazines, circulation soared, and product shifted. Magazine cover illustrators were the superstars of the new media, pulling in the big bucks associated today with movie, music, and sports celebrities, but there were plenty of jobs for the commercial artists needed to create artwork for packaging and marketing. Much of their output was lettering, integrated into work that was predominantly hand drawn.

There was a significant work force dedicated to producing one-off commercial signs, tickets, posters, showcards, and what we now term environmental graphics, on buildings and vehicles, and it flourished during the early twentieth century. This genre was distinct from, yet parallel to, the lettering used in graphic "process" work, for printing. Across society, in bookkeeping, commercial and personal correspondence, education, and all forms of writing, letters formed by the hand-held pen were the norm at the beginning of the century. Quite apart from literacy, penmanship was a social and career skill that could be acquired from instructional books and magazines, itinerant writing masters, and at the hundreds of private business schools. It would only gradually be usurped by automated pre-drawn types, controlled by the keyboards of typewriters, typesetting machines, word-processors, and personal computers. All in all, the first half of the twentieth century was a golden age for hand-drawn lettering, which proliferated and dominated the cultural landscape.

Commercial hand lettering flowered in its own right around a nucleus formed at the Holme School of Illustration in Chicago, circa 1900, by Fred Goudy, Bruce Rogers, Oswald Cooper and W. A. Dwiggins—all of whom would go on to produce important typefaces. None of these freelancers would be able to make a living solely from type design. Not even close, not even the prolific Goudy. They worked primarily as lettering artists, layout men, and typographers. Frank Holme was a renowned newspaper illustrator; his school was unusual in emphasizing the practical techniques of commercial art, unlike the beaux-arts model of art education, which fitted students for the fine arts and hand-made, private press work.



T. M. Cleland, by Rockwell Kent. Portrait lithograph appeared as the frontispiece to *The Decorative Work of T. M. Cleland,* 1929.

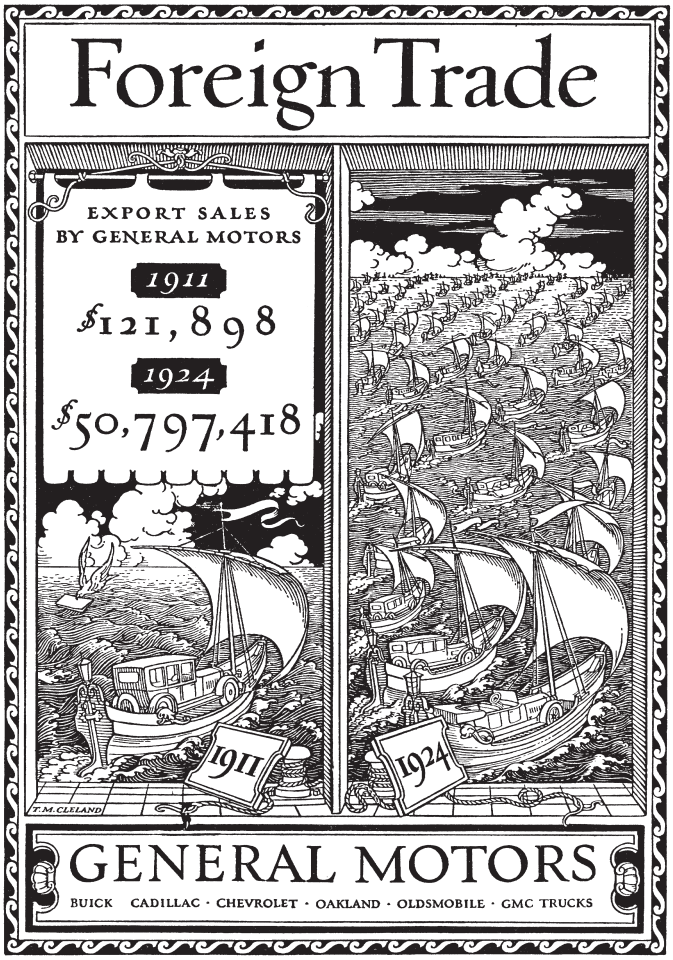
Thomas Maitland Cleland

T. M. CLELAND was 44 years old when he designed, illustrated, and completely hand lettered these two advertisements (figs. 1 & 2, from a series of six) for General Motors in 1925. He was on top of his game, a prince in a world of progressive consumer culture steeped in an historicism that he had helped shape, as a brotherhood of commercial artists designed advertisements, packaging, signage and brochures in the manner of fine old European books. Very fine, very old. This quest for traditional virtuosity, this molding of the new mass media of magazines in the shape of Art, was a radical, idealistic statement of cultural intent. Extreme nostalgia was a communal obsession, for although early 20th century design history is now associated with the birth of modernism, this went almost completely unnoticed at the time, as the culture at large was locked in a mock-Tudor Disneyland of massive retro attitude.

Cleland's epiphany had been seeing *The Decorative Illustration of Books,* by Walter Crane (a disciple of William Morris), displayed in the window of a New York bookstore 28 years earlier. He began his career as a typesetter, then learned the production process inside out, doing everything by hand, becoming a master of typography, lettering, decoration, illustration by pen and brush, spot color techniques, and special paper and packaging.

He designed only one typeface, Della Robbia, in 1904, although he did contribute the swash characters to Morris Benton's influential distress-concept Amsterdam Garamont. Why no more? He may have been embarrassed by the huge success of his first type, which, as a restless talent, he considered an ill-formed novice effort. Also, his lettering was an integral part of the total effect of his creations, not something to be hived off as stock.

In these ads, he integrates illustration, decoration, and lettering under the pen's nib. The



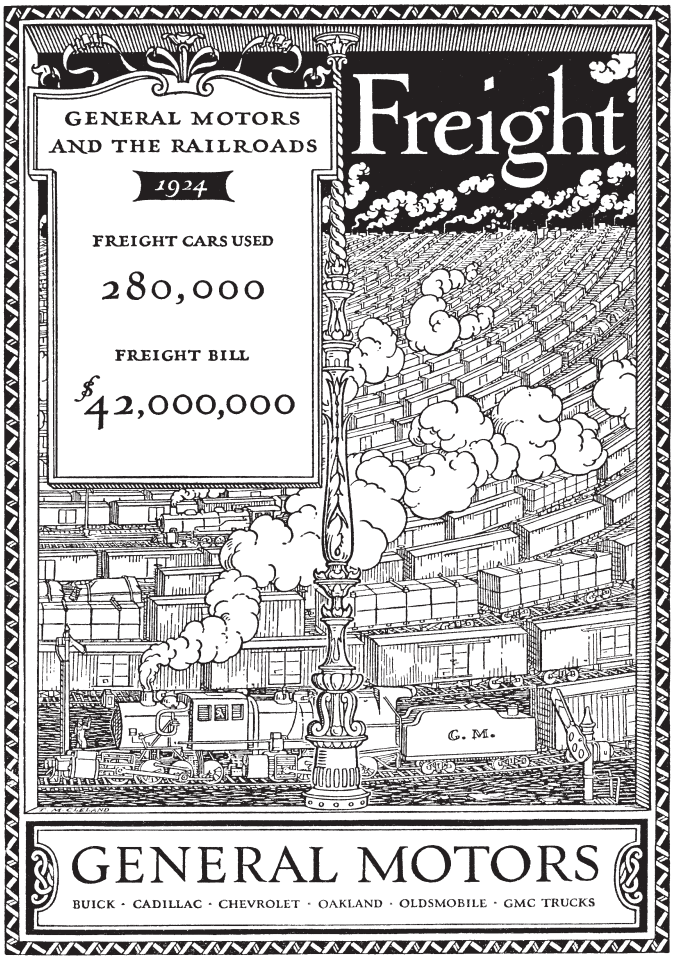


Fig. 1 & 2, Two ads from a campaign for General Motors. Designed, illustrated, and lettered by T. M. Cleland, 1925. Reproduced at 100%.

surreal, Durer-ish views of industrialized 'scapes have a fine, even line which creates a grey tone en masse. Several distinct decorative conceits, primarily architectural, more specifically from interior design, serve to merge the graphic with the pictorial: the hanging banner, the year tablets, and his favorite, the picture or window-frame with stylized wide-angle, quasi-architectural perspective, a Renaissance device that would later grace the cover of *Fortune* magazine throughout the 1930s.

Cleland could have drawn his lettering with more ostensible precision, but chose not to. His capacity for finely detailed handwork had been demonstrated in preposterous period pieces for Locomobile in the 'teens, with intricately shaded Didone capitals that achieved a softly modelled effect. But here, the finish of the headline is kept loose, to accommodate contextual shaping that would otherwise protrude from regimented form. In "Foreign", the descender of the "g" is short, to balance the headline within its panel, and this necessitates an angular form with diagonal lower cross stroke, so as not to appear squashed. "Freight", on the other hand, is a word of nice balance: the Capital "F" offsets the "gh" grouping, and the letters "ight" show four variants from the x-height. So this lovely word shape is given vast space in which to express itself, hanging above a horizon of endless factory smokestacks. Its form is expansive, with small x-height, a soaring ascender to the "h", and a "g" of great fullness.

Also of note: the charming, clef-like dollar signs; the dainty commas in the numbers; the extreme width contrast of the small-cap letters in the numerical panels (compare the wide X, M and N with the narrow B and E) and the asymmetric backslant of the diagonal strokes of A and M in the General Motors signature at bottom. The reason for this is apparent in the sequence of letters RAL: the A leans left to move its heaviest stroke closer to the center of these three letters, but this must not look arbitrary, so a similar skew is given to the M. The initial G slants the other way, to counteract; its curvature is elliptical, compared with the roundness of the Os. In all, the skew of the letters of General Motors is mixed: "balance

unity with variety," as Oswald Cooper put it.

Much of our knowledge of Cleland comes from *The Decorative Work of T. M. Cleland,* a commemorative volume of 1929. When one comes across his work in magazines, it's often in pieces. For instance, a Cadillac ad in the October 1927 *Arts and Decoration* features his illustration, but the type is Caslon, surely the wrong choice, as Cleland's 1927 Cadillac brochure, reproduced in the book, is all Bodoni. In a 1914 Locomobile ad (fig. 4), the border is a piece of TMC's Adam-ism, but the fashionable illustration, in the pochoir style of Georges Lepape from *La Gazette du Bon Ton,* is by "J Ch", and the headline lettering is by a third party. It's a drawn version of Goudy's Forum Title, in which the text is partially set—the all cap sentences that is, the upper and lower case is Kennerley—much rougher than Cleland's hand: note the inconsistent width of the Ns, the excessive splay of the Ms, and the poorly conceived The. Nonetheless, it is appropriate; a display setting of the sturdy Forum or Kennerley would have completely overpowered the delicate line drawing and tinted border.

The production process

JOB SPECIALIZATION was a function of the production process, which was essentially one of splitting up the different elements for speed of assembly, ease of approvals, and flexibility of format. This last is an important point, because during the course of a campaign an advertisement was often reconfigured for different sizes, e.g. full page, half page, etc., and for different publications with different page sizes, ad proportions, and printing specifications.[1] Not to mention the dreaded Author's Alterations: the client is ever aware of flexibility, and uses it to demonstrate rank (and assuage doubts), by adding extra copy points late in the production process. This is, one would surmise, what happened here—there really isn't enough space to accommodate all the text, and not enough time or budget to reset the text to a wider measure with less depth. The whole piece is, consequently, cramped vertically, and this ill conception, coupled with hasty assembly, has produced a lack of interest in the quality of finish, leading to the headline and text being positioned slightly askew of one another.

Then as now, suppliers at every stage of the work flow offered their services in companies of varying size and composition. The same component of work would be contracted out by some ad shops, and handled in-house by others.

Consider the stellar career of Oswald "Oz" Cooper, Chicago advertising typographer, lettering artist and type designer. He started as a printer's apprentice at age 15 in 1894, partnered with illustrator Fred Bertsch in 1904, then employed a group of designers for lettering and typographic layout, added a composing room, more illustrators, and photography, became the largest studio in the Midwest by 1921; then reverted to lettering and design.

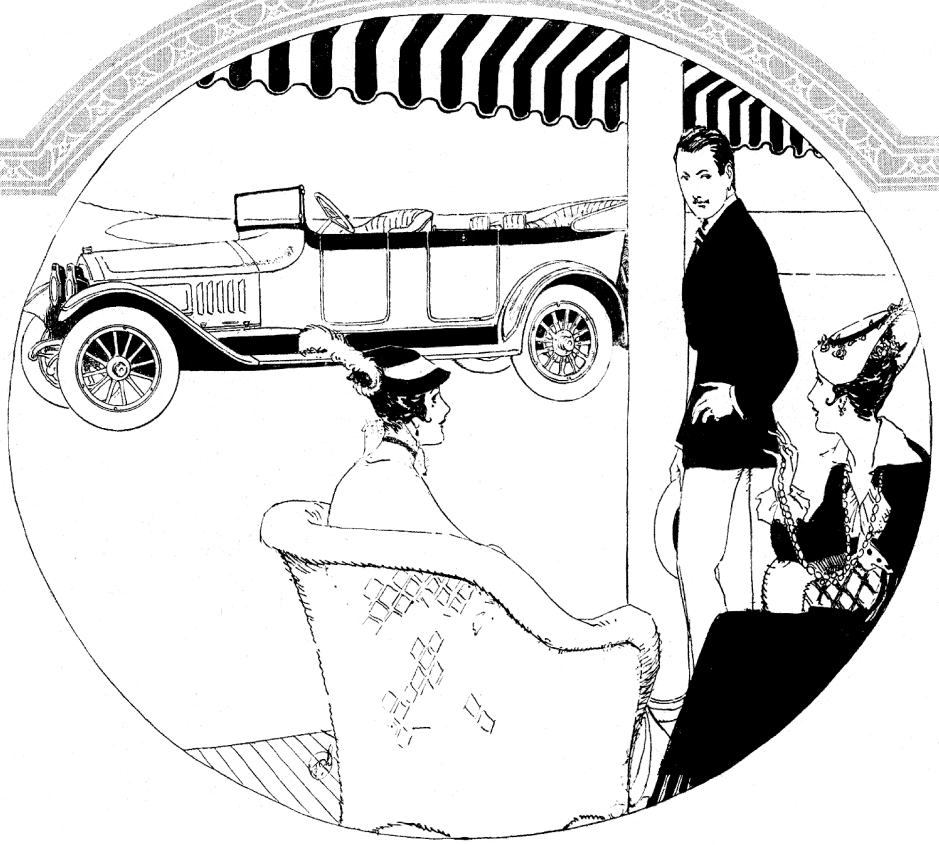
In Oz's Bull Pen (no stigma of effete artistry for these virile bro's), pictured in 1921 (fig. 5), the work is centered on typographic design. The designers begin with the client's or their own rough layout, and then create comprehensive layouts for their suppliers to work from. It's their responsibility to mark up and order type, and provide lettering. Lettering was, in fact, the entry-level requirement and function of studio artists and designers.

Edwin B. Gillespie, typesetter at Bertsch & Cooper, described the importance of lettering, "Mr. Cooper rarely lettered a display line if appropriate type faces were available to serve the particular need. The supply of type face suitable for effective display lines was rather limited in those days [the 1920s] and it frequently was necessary to hand letter headings in order to attain the effect desired by the advertiser."[2]

Fig. 3, LOCOMOBILE AD (opposite), *Life* magazine, May 21, 1914. Layout and border: T.M. Clelland. Headline: hand-lettered, Anon. Text: Forum Title (all-caps), Kennerley (upper & lower case).

Lettering artist Samuel Welo was less circumspect in his 1927 specimen book: "Hand lettering is now a requirement in good advertising, because of its ability to give the advertisement the much-needed selling power, as type forms have failed." Wishful thinking, no doubt; nonetheless, in most magazines of the 1920s there is an even mix of hand lettered and typeset headlines, and the ad layouts that call for more demonstrative heads are hand lettered.

During the '20s, hand lettering was used to add sparkle to layouts that were by and large rather plain. Art direction was just emerging as a profession. The Art Directors Club (New



ANNOUNCEMENT
The NEW LOCOMOBILES

The New Locomobiles are the result of our "Four Car A Day" idealism in manufacture. They show the success of our fixed policy—Quality instead of Quantity. They please us greatly, because we know that our admirers will instantly appreciate the advanced note in style, comfort and finish. The New Locomobiles are the nearest approach to our ideal—"The Best Built Car in America."

"TOUCH A BUTTON TO START"

LEFT DRIVE · CENTER CONTROL · Gear lever operated by right hand, the safest and most natural arrangement.

ONE MAN TOP With New and Exclusive Features.

ENTIRELY NEW APPEARANCE · Re-proportioned body with long sweeping Cowl, Moulded one-piece Fenders, Windshield close to Driver, New Bonnet, New Radiator, New Lamp Development, Concealed Horn.

THE ONLY HIGH GRADE SIX-CYLINDER CAR with four speeds, disc clutch and left drive with center control.

FIRST CAR TO BE ELECTRICALLY LOCKED · Locks any and all lights, whether switched on or off. Locks the car against theft, and locks the mechanism against meddling.

THE LOCOMOBILE COMPANY OF AMERICA, BRIDGEPORT, CONN.
National Branch House System

Fig. 5, The "Bull Pen", Bertsch & Cooper, Chicago, 1921. Photographer: unknown, from *The Book of Oz Cooper,* published by The Society of Typographic Arts, Chicago, 1949. Cooper is at the back of the room, in the separated area.

York) was founded in 1920, and the art directors of that era sought respectability by emphasizing the Artistic nature of the illustrations they commissioned,[3] and this attitude spilled over into mannered lettering treatments that avoided the plain, mechanical quality of type.

At the same time, there was the age-old practical reason for using hand lettering in emulation of the typographic effect, when adequate display type was simply not available. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, there was very little choice of large type, especially with fine detail, and secondly, the letterers always had the latest styles.

Fig. 6, Lincoln ad. Artists: unknown. *The Tatler,* April 11, 1928.

Modernism

the 1930s were quite different. Photography was more widely used, with its square-cut images contrasted against understated typography in dynamically tense modernist layouts, epitomized by Beall, Brodovitch, Agha, and Rand. The release of Kabel, Futura, and Gill Sans in 1927-29 made all the difference, giving typographers the tools to express the zeitgeist with a minimum of effort.

Prior to the new sans faces, magazine art directors struggled towards modernism from a number of directions. It can be seen emerging in the Lincoln ad (fig. 6, *The Tatler,* April 11, 1928). This is, in many ways, a traditional tombstone shaped, copy-driven co-op ad, with the usual elements of decorative border, plain product shot, headline, text, and brand name. However, there is a modernist economy of means, shown in the concentration of white space, the simplicity of the borders, and the plain repetition of headline type style in the brand name. The text face is a didone, replacing the old-styles of the 1920s, and this is matched with a moderne/art deco headline in a high-contrast sans serif lettering style that was trendy in signage and packaging during the Roaring Twenties. Compare with Morris Benton's Broadway, released in 1928; and Cooper's Boul Mich of 1927.

If a lettering style was at all popular, it was turned into a typeface. Over the first half of the 20th century, this gradually drove the interest in hand drawn forms away from areas that had been colonized by type, and into purely gestural scripts which it was much harder to mechanically imitate.

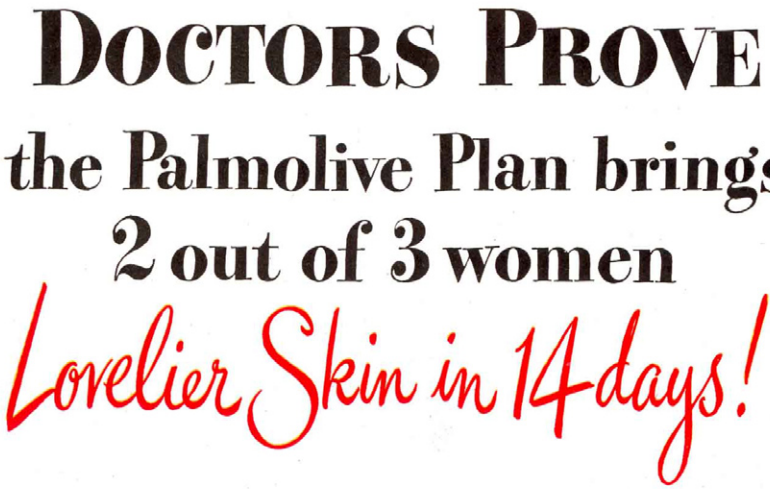


Fig. 7, Bounced "Bodoni" with brush script. From an advertisement in *Ladies Home Journal,* 1950

Fig. 8, IPANA AD, *Ladies Home Journal,* 1950. Hand lettering was widespread until the 1960s, and used in many places where you'd expect type today. Typography was an expense which art studios could avoid by doing in-house lettering, and given the poor quality of much type, the limited selection of faces, and the time factor, the results were frequently preferable.

This Ipana headline is so exquisitely rendered that it could easily pass for process lettering (from an early form of photo-heading machine). But it's better! Observe how the widths of the serifs on the "i" and "n" are adjusted for context, and how the tail of the first "a" is slightly closer to the body of the letter than in the second.

The body copy shows a garish combination of Garamond for the main text, and Futura Bold. Mixing old-style with modern? No problem, it's all about jazzing up the contrast. When one considers the lettering too, that makes four corners of a stylistic square: Didone, Oldstyle, Brush Script, Sans. All that's missing is a little blackletter or perhaps some Baroque engraved script.

The end of the era

PHOTO-LETTERING, also known as photo-process lettering, was introduced for headlines in the early 1930s, and a few large firms with offices and/or representatives in many areas came to dominate the business in North America. This undermined the market for small-town letterers and those of average ability, while refining high-end custom work based on typographic forms: a swan-song. It also provided work for a few in producing typefaces for photo-lettering fonts, and of course for those operating the photo-lettering cameras. The devastating effect of this new technology on the lettering profession was similar to that of royalty-free digital stock on photographers in the 1990s.

Working on his summation of the genre, *Lettering Design in the Graphic Arts* (1960), Mortimer Leach canvassed his successful, established peers and found them self-assured, but aware that photo-lettering had hurt the less-talented. "Reactions have been generally healthy and confident, but one disturbing statement was made by several—that very few young men are entering the field."[4] The writing had been on the wall for quite some time.

In the *Art Directors Club Annual* of 1949, a type-house ad sounded the death knell of hand lettering: "Lettering Inc. specialists offer you 'pre-drawn' styles, interpreted by qualified designers and blended into superior headings—in less time than ordinarily required and at a fraction of the cost." However, a look through a contemporary *Ladies Home Journal* reveals that the overwhelming majority of ad headlines are bounced scripts, expansively hand-made (fig. 7). No, the quality of casual script had been fully refined, and the phototypositor could not finish it off. Advertising of the 'fifties showed wording in a rich, mature mix of styles and technologies, with hand lettering to the fore (fig. 8).

So what did cause the demise of professional hand lettering? Four possible culprits: 1. Postwar design education, which shifted the emphasis from manual technique to conceptualization; 2. Big Idea ads, whether in the manner of Ogilvy or Bernbach, which had such darn clever copy that any fancy typography would have killed the wit; 3. Letraset, a ubiquitous form of pre-printed, dry-transfer lettering introduced in 1960, which absorbed some of the hand skills production artists had previously applied to their work with brush and pen; and 4. The phototypositor after all, not by being able to perform hand scripts more efficiently, but by adding a new, more compelling dimension to display type: the discourse between art director and type-house concerning the spacing, scaling and glyph choice of the ultra-sharp, super-slick headline setting, as chosen from, for instance, the Photo-Lettering Inc. catalog.

European modernism

ALTHOUGH this is the story of American advertising lettering, a few words about the lettering in European modernist posters of the 1920s and '30s would be appropriate, because this

Fig. 10, Armchair, *Marcel Breuer,* 1925

abcdefgh
jklmnopq
stuvwxy

Fig. 11, Universal Alphabet, *Herbert Bayer,* 1926
Bauhaus style: Bayer's ruthlessly reductive typeface plays the same tubular tune as Breuer's chair. Both men were on the faculty of the Bauhaus.

Fig. 9, International Office Exhibition, Basel.
Theo Ballmer, 1928.
127 cm x 90.4 cm, lithograph.
Ballmer's monstrously minimal celebration of European engineering and hi-tech lettering would not have been amiss in 1968 or 1998.

genre has acted as a catalyst, shaping graphic design historiography (which emerged in the 1980s) along the lines of the fine art model. Not surprising, given that key figures in modern art like Rodchenko, Heartfield, Lissitsky, and Schwitters were practising commercial artists—although they would not have relished the distinction—and there is a consistency to the formal quality of their work across the board.

Up to a certain size they worked in letterpress, but their medium and large posters were lithographed, with text that, for all its mechanical precision, is not typography. It is hand rendered, letter by letter. Theo Ballmer's *International Office Exhibition/Basel* of 1928 (fig. 9) is one such beast; four feet tall, and from six inches away it's hard to discern even the slightest deviation from perfection.

This kind of geometrical letterform surfaced again in the 1960s (op art) and '80s (techno). One of the iconic typefaces of the digital revolution was Neville Brody's Industria, originally drawn with pen and ink for *The Face* magazine in 1984.

No matter the technique, the geometric letter is expressive of mechanization and modernity. The seminal object in the transition of the Bauhaus from espousing a craft production model to that of the assembly line was Marcel Breuer's tubular steel *Armchair* of 1925 (fig. 10). Its influence on Herbert Bayer's *Universal Alphabet* (fig. 11) of a year later is apparent.

The inherent irony of modernist theory when put into practice was outed by Post-modernist pioneers Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown in 1974: "Formalism was more symbolic than functional. It was symbolically functional. It represented function more than resulted from function. It looked functional more than worked functionally."[5] Behind the curtain, there was always some technician bending a steel pipe to shape, or draftsman guiding a pen around a template. It was not until the digitization of the graphics industry in the 1990s that the modernists' 1920s vision of a mass typography of geometrically defined letterforms, with perfect mechanical reproduction at any size, was practically feasible—limited only by the resolution of the output device, not the hand skill of its operator.

1. *The Typography of Advertising that Pays,* Gilbert P. Farrar, Appleton, New York, 1920.
2. *The Book of Oz Cooper,* Society of Typographic Arts, Chicago, 1949.
3. *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art,* Michele H. Bogart, University of Chicago Press, 1995.
4. *Letter Design in the Graphic Arts,* Mortimer Leach, Reinhold, New York, 1960.
5. "Functionionalism, Yes, But," statement for the symposium *The Pathos of Functionalism*, Berlin, 1974, in *Architecture and Urbanism* 47 (Nov. 1974), p.33.