Jan Tschichold in different phases of life

1920 at the Leipzig academy

App. 1930
(photo by E. Wasow)

1948, in London

1962
(photo by Frank Bolliger)

Jan Tschichold is one of the most outstanding and influential typographers of the 20th century. He was a master in his field, worked as a teacher, wrote a number of books, designed typefaces, and worked his entire life as designer and writer. The significance of his influence on the print industry and designers in Europe and the USA is uncontested and his famous typeface Sabon is still a bestseller. In honor of his 100th birthday, Linotype Library is dedicating this review of his life and work.

Childhood: son of a script writer

Jan Tschichold was born in Leipzig on April 2, 1902, the first son of the script writer Franz Tschichold and his wife Maria, neé Zapff. His father's profession gave him an early introduction to the many forms of written scripts. He often helped his father and learned script writing without ever thinking of this as his future. He wanted to be a fine arts painter but his parents saw this profession as too unstable and did not believe he could earn a living at it. As a compromise he decided to become a drawing teacher. After finishing his schooling the 14-year-old Tschichold started a teaching seminar in Grimma, near Leipzig.

The World's Fair for Books and Graphics in 1914 was an important experience for the young man. In his free time he studied the books of Edward Johnston (Calligraphy, Ornamental Script and Applied Script) and Rudolf von Larisch (Study in Ornamental Writing) and created a number of calligraphic writings. He was already starting to form an interest in old typefaces and one of his manuscripts from this time shows the capitals and lower case of an italic typeface, perhaps Granjon's italic. He borrowed these only half-finished letters from an old work, probably one from the 17th century. For a 16-year-old beginner, this is quite a remarkable feat.

He broke off his teaching studies after three years when he realized that he wanted to be a typeface designer and attended the Academy for Graphic Arts in Leipzig.
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Star student

In spite of his youth, Tschichold was accepted in the typography class of Professor Hermann Delitsch in Leipzig in the spring of 1919. He also learned engraving, copperplate, woodcutting, wood engraving and book binding. He was Delitsch’s favorite student right from the beginning. The professor often said that there was not anything he could teach that Tschichold did not already know and gave his student free rein. In 1921, when he was just 19, the academy director von Tiemann asked Tschichold to teach an evening class in script writing. Tschichold had become Tiemann’s star student and had a small studio at the academy.

During this time, much was being made of the work of Rudolf Koch from Offenbach. Jan Tschichold was impressed by Koch’s Maximilian Grotesk and visited the artist a number of times. Tshichold adopted Koch’s handwriting as a model for many of his designs of this time period. He spent endless hours in the library and book trade center in Leipzig. There he came into contact with the scripts of Simon-Pierre Fournier and many old script master books. He began to collect such materials. He regularly received design commissions for advertisements for the Leipzig trade fairs and between 1921 and 1925 wrote a number of such ads in calligraphic form.

At this time there were mostly robust or bold typefaces in use, regular weights were hardly used. Typefaces were mixed without much thought and good typographic quality was rarely found. Book artists had little knowledge of typography and applied even their own typefaces poorly. Even Emil Rudolf Weiß still corrected his sketches in millimeters and for more or less line spacing used the terms ‘a little lower’ or ‘a little higher’. Jan Tschichold examined these deficiencies and this was probably the beginning of his lifelong occupation with themes like the arrangement of typefaces, questions of the construction of a book title, etc.

Bodoni was just beginning to become popular and Tschichold’s interest for the setting and form of the typefaces grew. In 1923 he began the once unknown profession of a typographic designer and worked as such for Fischer & Wittig, a major book printer in Leipzig. An advertisement from this time is a remarkable document because it reveals evidence of Tschichold’s study of the scripts of Ludovico Arrighi and Tagliente.

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The Influence of the Bauhaus

Starting in 1924, Tschichold was heavily influenced by the style of the Bauhaus and the elementary and functional design. His visit to the first Bauhaus exhibition in Weimar both shocked and fascinated him; he was intrigued by this new movement and its possible influence on typography. Tschichold was so impressed by the work of the Russian artists that he started to call himself Iwan Tschichold. His poster for the Warsaw publisher Philobiblon shows a brand new Tschichold, one who placed more emphasis on arrangement than on artistry. The typefaces were sans serifs with no relation at all to handwriting.

Tschichold became more and more irritated by the typography of the times. He was strongly influenced by modern painters like László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky, whose works used contrasting forms to display balance and conflict. Tschichold believed that the cure for typography lay in abandoning rules, adopting symmetrical setting, and the exclusive use of sans serif typefaces.

A first spectacular publication of these views, 'Elementary Typography', appeared in a special October 1925 edition of the magazine 'Typographic News'. This was a kind of typographic manifest and caused an uproar in the world of design. It inspired heated discussions and every typesetter came to know the name Tschichold. His theses were just as passionately adopted by some as they were rejected by others. The first positive effect came a few years later when the lavish ornaments and outdated typefaces disappeared and centered typesetting began to be abandoned.

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Excerpts from Tschichold’s Manifest:

1. The new typography emphasizes function.

2. The goal of every typography is communication (whose means it represents). Communication must appear in the shortest, simplest and most forceful form.

3. ... in this optically oriented world, the elementary means of the new typography is the exact image: photography. The basic typographic form is the sans serif typeface in all variations: light, semibold, bold, condensed to extended. Typefaces that belong to particular styles or have limited national character (Gothic, black letter) are not elementally designed and limit the possibility of international understanding.

4. External organisation is the design of strong, simultaneous opposites through the use of contrasting forms, degrees and weights ...

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Munich

Tschichold strove for independence and settled in Berlin at the beginning of 1926. In Leipzig he had designed a number of covers and title typefaces for the Insel publishing house. While in Berlin he married Edith Kramer. Then one day he received a letter from Paul Renner asking him if he would be willing to take over Renner’s position at the School of Applied Arts in Frankfurt. The correspondence continued and eventually Tschichold ended up moving to Munich, where Renner was founding the new Munich master school. Tschichold started his work for the city of Munich on June 1, 1926, and taught typography and calligraphy at the master school as well as the vocational school.

In 1927 and 1928 Tschichold created a large series of posters for the films of the Phoebus Palace, a cinema in Munich.

His instructional book, “The New Typography”, appeared in 1928. This book became the bible of every young typesetter. But Tschichold’s film posters and the typographic ideas were scorned in some circles and the growing Nazi movement soon endangered the further use of the new typography.

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Book advertisement, 1932

Book binding, 1928

Cover, 1931

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Refuge in Switzerland

In the years up to 1933 Tschichold designed a number of works in the style of the Bauhaus style and the new typography. In that year, however, he fled from the Nazi government after a search of his house, temporary imprisonment, and the loss of his job. Tschichold sought refuge in Switzerland. It had taken him just a few years to propagate the new typography but the Nazi party put a quick end to whatever he had achieved. The typography of the Nazi era was sterile and just as poor as that of the years before 1925.

Tschichold started working at the Basel School of Applied Arts as well as part-time at the Benno Schwabe publishing house in Basel. His new beginning was difficult, defined by financial problems and a lack of appropriate and interesting work. In addition, as a foreigner, he could lose his work or resident permits at any time. There were, however, some high points. His book "Typographic Design" appeared in 1935 and there were 1000 orders even before it was printed. In the same year Tschichold exhibited his work at the major London print shop Lund Humphries, after which he received commissions from the shop as well as the task of designing the typography of the world famous Penrose Annual of 1938.

His next book appeared in 1942, "Typeface Theory, Practices and Sketches". Tschichold left the Bauhaus and elementary influence behind and returned to classic typography and art. This is evident in the numerous designs he produced in this period. Since 1938 he had devoted himself completely to book typography. He abandoned the assymetrical arrangements of industrial typography and began to center almost all his work.

Between 1933 and 1946, Tschichold produced numerous journal articles, in part due to financial pressure. By 1941 he at last saw the end of these difficult years when he was hired by the growing company Birkhaeuser in Basel. In recognition of his contributions during this time, Tschichold was granted citizenship in Basel in 1942.

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Post-War Years in London

In the summer of 1945, the famous English book printer Oliver Simon and the Penguin Books publisher Allan Lane came to Basel to convince Tschichold to join the publishing house as typographer. Tschichold was delighted to accept the offer but it was another year before he could move to London. He began to rework the typographic form of Penguin books in 1946, a massive task encompassing the complete overhaul of the books’ typography. Tschichold instated strict typesetting rules to raise the formal level of the printing and published "In the Service of the Book" to detail these guidelines.

In the few years spent working in London, Tschichold gained much respect and was named an honorary member of the London Double Crown Club, a selective group of English typographers and printers.

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Return to Switzerland

Soon after his return to Switzerland at the end of 1949, the massive drop in the worth of the English pound led Tschichold to begin negotiations over a position at the master school for Germany’s book printers in Munich. Due to unacceptable conditions - Tschichold would have been forced to give up his Swiss citizenship - nothing came of this attempt.

One of Tschichold’s most important books appeared during this time. The “Master Book of Typefaces” reflects his 30-year occupation with typeface forms across the ages.

In 1955 Tschichold took a position as typographer at the Hoffmann-La Roche company in Basel. He received numerous recognitions and offers from all over Europe and the USA. His most widely read and translated book, “Arbitrary Measurement Relations of the Book Page”, first appeared in 1962 and would go through 18 editions.

At the beginning of 1967 Tschichold traveled to the USA and held talks in Chicago as well as at Harvard and Yale universities. While the older Tschichold typefaces designed for one of the first photo-typesetting machines remained unimportant, 1967 also saw the appearance of Sabon at Linotype, Stempel and Monotype, a typeface which would become a classic.

Jan Tschichold died on August 11, 1974, in Locarno, Switzerland.

Few have left deeper impressions on the typography of the last fifty years as Jan Tschichold. Although he only held a teaching position for 8 years during his youth, he continues to have an endless number of students. He cleared away the old typography of pre-1925 and made room for a modern, structured and regulated new typography.

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Return to Switzerland

Sabon was the result of many years of preparation. Its model was the 1952 Garamond interpretation which Jacob Sabon and Conrad Berner produced in Frankfurt and which so impressed the young Tschichold. It was the first typeface that was produced with undifferentiated forms for the linotype, monotype and hand setting.

Sabon was Tschichold's most important typeface creation. There were originally three weights: normal, italic and semibold. Linotype expanded the Sabon family in 1984 by adding a curved semibold weight.

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