

THE ARTISTIC PRINTING MOVEMENT

Rapidly Advancing Printing to a Place Among the Fine Arts
 The British Printer of January/February 1891 announced that these multi-color masterpieces of the Artistic Printing genre had won First [top] and Second Prizes in an international competition sponsored by Mander Brothers Printing Inks. The prescribed theme suggests that perhaps the printing industry needed a “reality check”?

The intricate borders were painstakingly hand-built from typefounders’ vignettes, tiny motif fonts and rules. By today’s standards, such time-consuming and skill-intensive work, the pinnacle of compositor expertise in its day, may seem laughably quaint.

This trend began in the 1870s, an era dominated in western art history by Impressionism centered in Paris. With the notable exception of Charles Derriey, the French had contributed little to innovative type design since Joseph Gille’s exciting tuscan half a century before.

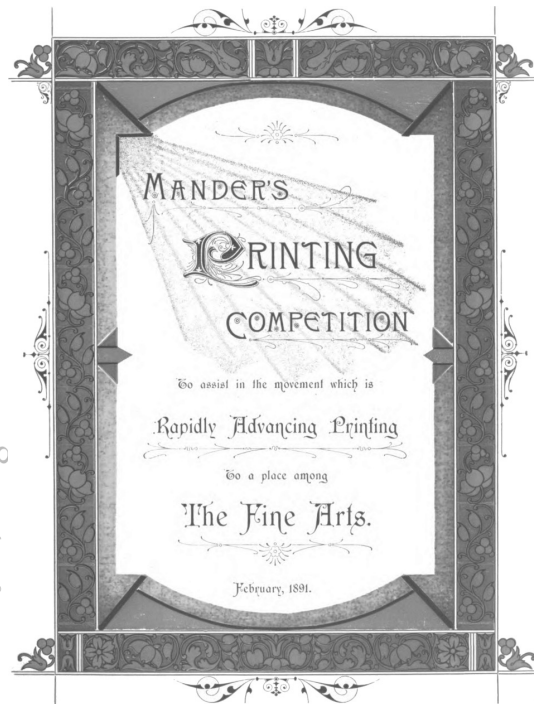
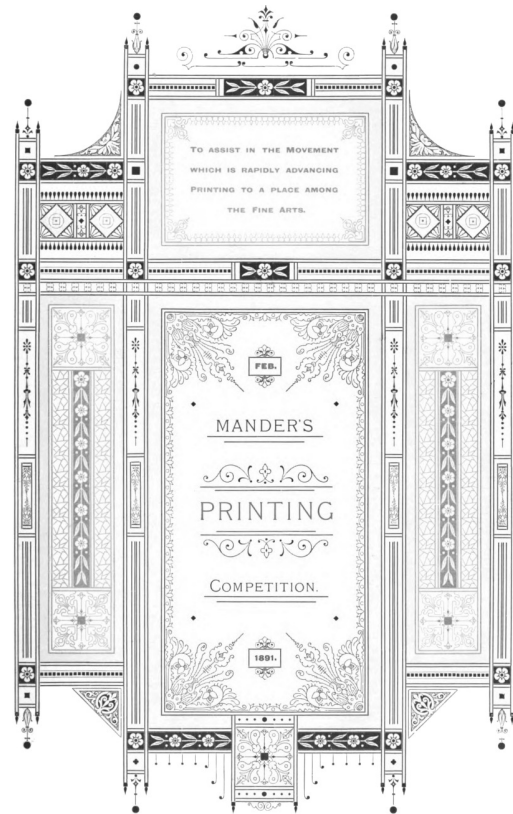
French talent that otherwise might have designed display type was preoccupied with the freeform potential of color-separated lithography. This technology, which evolved into the 20th-century’s CMYK offset-press standard, challenged letterpress type designers elsewhere to imitate its striking three-dimensional and layering effects.

Until the 1870s, Great Britain was the long-established world leader in letterpress job-font design; most type sold by US founders was imported from London or Edinburgh. Suddenly, a steady stream of competitive job faces gushed from Philadelphia, New York and Boston. By mid-decade, these faces, designed and/or cut by Scottish and German immigrants, captured the worldwide market.

Lithography and Artistic Printing co-existed on separate courses into the 1890s. French poster masters set the pace: Jules Chéret dynamically integrated text and graphic elements for the first time; Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec presented stark, high-contrast imagery with subordinated text. In the US and UK, letterpress typefounders responded with color methods, fanciful alphabets and ornamentation.

In Germany, mainstream type design was intent on perfecting traditional gothic letterforms with limited appeal abroad. Printing-related trade journals adopted roman text faces by the mid-1870s, and multi-discipline designers like Otto Eckmann and Peter Behrens emerged to lead the Jugendstil Movement.

Surely, perfectly symmetrical boxes like these were the very inspiration for “thinking outside the box.” Without these targets for rebellion, the most gifted Art Nouveau commercial artists and Arts and Crafts book illustrators might never have revolutionized graphic design as we know it today.



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AaBbCcDdEeFfGgHhIiJjKkLlMmNnOoPpQqRrSsTtUuVvWwXxYyZz!?!&1234567890
 Golden, 1890 William Morris, UK/Kelmscott Press

HaBbCcDdEeFfGgHhIiJjKkLlMmNnOoPpQqRrSsTtUuVvWwXxYyZz&!?!1234567890
 Troy = Chaucer, 1894-96 William Morris, UK/Kelmscott Press



Morris Initials, 1896 William Morris, UK/Kelmscott Press



the Arts and Crafts Movement. By the late-19th century, the Industrial Revolution impacted the everyday lifestyles and value systems of western civilization. Expertise and personal pride in skilled labor perfected during the middle ages were endangered by “machine worship” and expectations of mass production.

English social reformer William Morris [1834-1896] acted on a lifelong conviction that fine craftsmanship is as praiseworthy as painting or sculpture. Allied with gothic-revival architects, pre-Raphaelite artists and like-minded writers, he championed traditional materials, natural themes and manual methods.

Retiring from a highly respected career in ground-breaking residential decorative arts (furniture, textile/wallpaper designs), Morris devoted the final years of his life to Kelmscott Press, which he established in 1891.

Emulating incunabular letterforms and 15th-century technology, he published limited editions of 23 classic literature titles. For the first since Gutenberg, these books purposefully and meticulously unified all handmade type and initials, borders and illustrations, paper and bindings to suit the subject matter and intended ambience.

For the ideal types, Morris studied gothic manuscript calligraphy and the work of Nicholas Jenson (first successful roman type, 1470). The text on this page is set in “Golden Type” (1890); the illustration caption, in “Troy | Chaucer” (two sizes of the same style, 1894-96). Initials like the above “T” graced pages of the most famous and spectacular example of the Kelmscott collection, “The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer.”

Response to these masterpieces was immediate, profound and permanent. Morris’ exquisite volumes rethought book design as an art form, introduced the concept of “appropriate” typefaces, inspired calligraphers and typographers everywhere and set high standards for the graphic arts that persist today.

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones: Detail of woodcut illustration, “Troilus and Criseyde.”
The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer Kelmscott Press • Hammersmith, 1896

