

Jan Tschichold at Penguin Books: A Resurgence of Classical Book Design

By Richard Doubleday

In the late 1940s, book publishers like Penguin desired the best typographic expertise in Europe and offered designers unprecedented artistic discretion. When Penguin Books publisher Allen Lane (1902-70) appointed Jan Tschichold (1902-74), he may have been unaware that his new hire would set the standard for successful book design in Britain over the next three years.

Tschichold's redesign of Penguin Books from 1947-49 revolutionized typographic conventions.

By the time Tschichold arrived at the publishing firm from his native Switzerland in March 1947, paperbacks had become a beloved form of mass media, and Penguin Books in particular furnished the general public with a broad range of affordable, easily attainable, and outstanding literature. Penguin Books' design, however, fell far short of their literary reputation. Before Tschichold's arrival, he had requested samples of a number of Penguin books and soon realized that composition rules and standards were virtually nonexistent at the company, as the production department depended on sample pages and different sets of house rules supplied by printers employed by Penguin. In addition, Old Style No. 2, Gill Sans and Times New Roman were the only fonts being utilized throughout all the series.

Tschichold decided to set a practical look for Penguin that would suit a large number of books and achieve balance,

consistency, and legibility. In his view, adherence to the tenets of classic typography—legibility, a balance of type styles, wide margins, exquisite contrast, simplicity, and integrated rules and ornaments—was integral to a book’s function. For example, he preferred classical typefaces for long pages of text, noting that “Good typography has to be perfectly legible and is, as such, the result of intelligent planning. The classical typefaces such as Garamond, Janson, Baskerville and Bell are undoubtedly the most legible.” ¹

Tschichold spent time studying civilizations, typography and the book arts in the Leipzig “Hall of Culture,” in 1914, at the age of twelve. It was during this period that Tschichold studied roman alphabets, calligraphy, ornate writing in illuminated manuscripts, the history and craftsmanship of written letters, old type specimens and thus shaped his educational foundation.

During his studies at the Teacher Training College at Grimma, Tschichold realized that he wanted to become a type designer and was given permission by his parents to enroll at the Academy for the Graphic Arts and the Book Production Trade in Leipzig learning book-binding, calligraphy, etching and engraving. Tschichold taught himself lettering and calligraphy by hand, investigating the lettering in Edward Johnston’s (1872-1944) book *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering* and Rudolp von Larisch’s (1856-1934) *Unterricht in ornamentaler Schrift*. (Instruction in Ornamental Writing). These self taught calligraphy exercises increased Tschichold’s knowledge and sensitivity to letter spacing, word spacing and leading by assimilating the lettering of Johnston and von Larisch. Apart from his studies at the Academy for the Graphic Arts and the Book Production Trade,

Tschichold enrolled for one year at the School of Arts and Crafts in Dresden and was mentored by the type designer and writing teacher Heinrich Wieyck (1874-1931). Tschichold was inspired by many of Wieyck's type designs—Mercedes Antiqua, Tranon, Woellmer Antiqua, Belvedere and Kolumbus, that were based on the Italian Renaissance writing scripts. In addition, Wieyck designed a family of fraktur's including Wieyck Gotisch, Wienck Fraktur and Wienck Kanzlei.

Tschichold had first begun to pull away from “The New Typography” and the “functional” principles of the Bauhaus while designing books in Switzerland between 1933-46. He realized then that symmetrical and asymmetrical typographic treatments could equally accomplish the requirements of successful book design. As he stated in a 1959 lecture at The Type Director's Club, New York City: “Obeying good rules of composition and book design in the manner of traditional typography is not ‘putting the clock back,’ but an eccentric style of setting is almost always debatable.”²

In April 1935, Tschichold's change of design direction became public, when his article “The design of centred typography,” (Vom richtigen Satz auf Mittelachse) in *Typographische Monatsblätter* No. 4, stated that centered typography was acceptable, and typographic design is subject to the technical and aesthetic requirements and demands of book design, for example, title pages with short lines of text, are aesthetically more appealing when centered and symmetrical settings were easier and more feasible for compositors. Tschichold took great concern with title pages, having felt that they lacked any typographic feeling and had become a neglected area

within books. In addition, the title page sets the tone and first impression for the reader and must depict the style of the book. He had fervently studied examples of title pages and centered typography from M. Brun's (b.1778) *Manuel Pratique de la typographie française*, Paris, 1825 and Henri Fournier's (1800-88) *Traité de la typographie*, Paris, 1825. These practical typographic handbooks, covered the fine details and nuances of composition, presswork and were principle French typographic reference books for virtually all of the nineteenth century.

Tschichold's work at Benno Schwabe in Switzerland in the early 1930s foreshadowed his work at Penguin. The standard house rules Tschichold established and enforced there, which addressed word and letter spacing, leading, punctuation, and spelling, were a foundation for the composition rules at Penguin. Likewise, the practical, symmetric house style Tschichold set for Birkhäuser Classics (Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel) was similar to his design approach at Penguin as well. Although produced for a mass market, Birkhäuser titles were lavished with high production values, such as patterned paper and covers made of linen or sometimes leather. His work for Sammlung Birkhäuser Collection, the publisher's series of classic editions, established a house style using black and one color on unbleached paper, ornate patterns, and all upper-case typography on three or four lines with a thin rule separating the title from the publisher's name—elements that would be seen in titles produced later at Penguin.

The challenging task at Penguin was a natural evolution and perfectly suited for Tschichold as a designer, particularly with the

decline in standards and appearance of Penguin books during and after World War II. The Penguin invitation presented an opportunity to develop a new set of typographic rules, exercise his typographic theories and apply his classic, historical knowledge of typography to the mass-production of books.

The Penguin Composition Rules

Once at Penguin, Tschichold began work by circulating written comments and criticisms about existing Penguin examples to the editorial staff. He then developed the “Penguin Composition Rules,” the standardized formats and typographic specifications which addressed text composition, indenting, punctuation marks, spelling, capitals, small capitals, italics, folios, figures, references, footnotes, make-up, and the printing of plays and poetry. The Penguin composition rules, which ran to four pages, unified the design of all series while bringing harmony and economy to its publishing program.

Underlying the Penguin Composition Rules was the implementation of a grid system. The grids were unalterable instructions that set the foundation for the trimmed page area, width and height of each book, visual cover size, type area on cover and spine, position and style of the spine label and lettering on labels for all the Penguin series. The grid gave Tschichold the flexibility to create appropriate scale relationships between type and dimensions of each book, to initiate a maximum area and correct imposition for any King Penguin plate, and to designate the most appropriate typeface to accurately reflect the content of the book.

After establishing these design standards, Tschichold had the responsibility of explaining it to the large group of Penguin Books compositors and printers, many of whom were less than enthusiastic for the intensified level of scrutiny and involvement in their work. Tschichold's presence was most clearly felt in the publisher's composing rooms, which he visited often to make arduous revisions to typographical arrangements and layouts. Tschichold stated, "Every day I had to wade through miles of corrections (often ten books daily). I had a rubber stamp made: 'Equalize letter-spaces according to their visual value.' It was totally ignored; the hand compositors continued to space out the capitals on title-pages (where optical spacing is essential) with spaces of equal thickness."³ Despite initial resistance, Tschichold persisted, and after about a year he began to see improvements. He could then turn his full energies toward the actual design of the books.

The Penguin Series

One of Tschichold's first design tasks was to refine the Penguin series covers. The elegant golden section proportions $4 \frac{3}{8} \times 7 \frac{1}{8}$ " (111mm x 181mm), color-coding by genre, sans serif typographic covers, and bird logo were based on the German Albatross Books series, which set the standard for early paperback book design. Penguin publisher Allen Lane recognized Albatross's effectiveness in using design to establish a brand identity in the marketplace, and he wanted Penguin to do the same. Although Tschichold was prevented by his publisher to completely redesign the Penguin series due to brand loyalty, he did what he could to modify the existing "Penguin

look”—the distinguishing orange horizontal stripes, developed by the imprint’s first production editor, Edward Young (1913-2003).

In 1948, Tschichold’s first revision included the introduction of different weights of Monotype Gill Sans for hierarchy and emphasis, meticulous letter and word spacing for both the title and author’s name, and a warmer tone of the original orange color. Tschichold commented on his design strategy: “I could only bring the earlier ugly proportions into a happier relationship.”⁴ For the second revision, Tschichold redesigned the Penguin logo at the bottom center of the front jacket. He also reduced the point size of the typography and introduced a four-point line between the title and author’s name. What he did retain was Penguin’s characteristic color-coding by genre—orange for fiction, green for crime, blue for biography, burgundy for travel, yellow for miscellaneous and gray for current affairs—and avoidance of pictorial covers.

Tschichold’s final revision of the Penguin cover in 1949 was to modify the Penguin Books trademark. He improved the letter spacing and reduced its overall size for improved proportion. He decreased the line between the title and author’s name to two points and also introduced two hairline border rules above and below the title and author’s name. These final revisions firmly established a standardized format, which unified the Penguin series.

The King Penguin Series

The King Penguin series, which covered art, science, leisure and world history, was one of the first series to be printed in color and in hardcover by Penguin. Tschichold decided that the overall redesign of the King Penguins would emulate the prominent and much

admired Insel-Verlag (Insel-Bücherei) picture books from Germany. Each book numbered approximately 64 pages, with an equal distribution of text and images. The appearance was classic and elegant. They were smaller in bulk at a size of 4 3/4" x 7 1/16" (119mm x 179mm), and sold at twice the price of paperback Penguin books. For King Penguins, Tschichold used unconventional classic typefaces, for example, Centaur, Pastonchi, Poliphilus, Scotch Roman, Lutetia and Walbaum.

Of particular note in the King Penguin series is *A Book of Scripts* by Alfred Fairbank (1895-1982). Tschichold adapted the cover design from a page in *Arte Subtilissima intitulada Orthographia Practica*, a classic work on calligraphy and engraving by the 16th century Spanish writing master, Juan de Yciar (1515-90). Tschichold was concerned with the quality of reproductions, particularly when it involved calligraphy and exquisite lettering. For *A Book of Scripts*, Tschichold utilized his early training as a calligrapher by drawing the roman capitals by hand on the front and back cover, carefully restoring them to their original shapes. The National Book League recognized this title as one of the best-designed books of 1949.

The Penguin Classics

In January 1946, Penguin Classics were launched as a new series of translations of Greek, French and Latin classics, including such titles as *Ivan Turgenev: On the Eve* edited by G.C. Gardiner, *Honoré de Balzac: Old Goriot* translated by M.A. Crawford and *Fyodor Dostoyevsky: Crime and Punishment* translated by David Magarshack. *Homer's The Odyssey* translated by E.V. Rieu was the first volume of this new library of translations. These titles appealed to

the many serious readers looking for foreign literature translated into English.

Within seven months of joining Penguin, Tschichold redesigned the following volumes within the Penguin Classics series: *Sophocles: The Theban Plays* edited by E.F. Watling, *Voltaire: Candide* edited by John Butt, *Tacitus: On Britain and Germany* edited by H. Mattingly, *Dante: The Divine Comedy I* edited by Dorothy L. Sayers, *Xenophon: The Persian Expedition* edited by Rex Warner and *Virgil: The Pastoral Poems* edited by E.V. Rieu. The series appealed to the serious readers who had little to no knowledge of foreign literature.

Tschichold had inherited the former series cover design, whose elements for example, title plate and roundel were disordered and did not compliment one another. For the redesign of the Penguin Classics series, Tschichold reintroduces the common monochromatic frame appearing in rich purple or burnt sienna. Just within the frame, Tschichold adds a thick geometric line, a subtle detail that allows the cover to resonate and gives the series a classic and appealing personality. The illustrations, engravings and roundels appearing on the covers and throughout the interior page spreads were commissioned by prominent English designers and artists such as Elizabeth Friedlander (1903-84) and Berthold Wolpe (1905-89). The roundels were created for many book covers within the series as iconic representations of the characters in the story and to add character and finishing touch to the design. Tschichold employed the classic and assertive typographic features of Monotype Perpetua for many of the covers within the Penguin Classics. For the Chapter headings and body text, Tschichold would mix various weights of

Monotype Bembo and Monotype Centaur Titling. The results were a stunning, classical and unique quality that was heightened by the exquisite Perpetua setting and elegant roundel insignia.

One notable Masterpiece from the series of Penguin Classics is Tschichold's book design for *The Transformations of Lucius*, otherwise known as *The Golden Ass*, written by Lucius Apuleius, translated by the poet and novelist Robert Graves. First published as a softback in 1950, Penguin issued their own hardback version, a 298-page, 2,000 limited deluxe edition the following year. The book detail included a Beige cloth gilt stamped lettering on a vellum spine, with Vellum tips, also referred to as French corners, finished by hand to reinforce the spine and binding to avoid damage while handling. For the lettering on the spine, *The Golden Ass*, Tschichold creates a hand drawn cursive lettering in a decorative and graceful script with vitality and harmony. Two rules of different weights has been added for visual support within the spine. The book was protected with a tan dustwrapper and fitted inside the original two-color card slipcase. Tschichold set the two-color card slipcase in all caps, monotype Perpetua in three distinctive groupings of typography. What makes this design unique is the harmony and extreme clarity achieved by Tschichold's exquisitely centered arrangements and agreeable groupings and elegant relationships of typography.

These three groupings are comprised of fourteen lines of type, centrally placed and similar point size throughout. However, the point size of the title, *The Golden Ass*, being the most important, is increased to a larger point and carefully letterspaced to draw

attention. Also, the description of the books contents, comprised of five lines of type, is accentuated in an intense red and placed in the center of the cover. In addition, Tschichold includes a three ruled frame device running around the edge of the slipcase to complement the typography to achieve balanced perfection. Tschichold set the book in monotype Lutetia, a typeface designed by Jan van Krimpen and printed by Silk & Terry on a specially made blue-white wove paper made by Wiggins, Teape & Co.

Monotype typefaces

During the 1920s and 1930s The Monotype Corporation, under the direction of “typographic consultant” Stanley Morison (1889-1967), raised the standard of British publishing and printing by reviving a series of classical typefaces for machine composition. By the time Tschichold arrived at Penguin Books, the setting of type by machine had become an accepted practice by printers and publishers, as composition machines had become more proficient and books composed and printed by mechanical means were considered as superb as those created by hand. The revolution of mechanical production moved quickly through the printing trade as composition machines became more proficient.

Tschichold adopted The Monotype Corporation’s most distinguished typefaces for Penguin Books, skillfully identifying the right face for every variety of book and choosing the font that would most appropriately suit the personality of the given text, for example Caslon Old Face with its distinctive and charming oblique styling for the Penguin Musical Scores, the often relied on Bembo with its

discrete qualities for the Penguin Shakespeare series, and the elegant and slender features of Bell for many of the Penguin Poets.

Back to Switzerland

Tschichold resolved to return to Switzerland in December 1949, having felt that his work at Penguin was complete, coupled with the substantial drop in the value of the English pound. His last task was recommending compatriot Hans Schmoller (1916-85) from the Curwen Press as his successor.

Tschichold's only design assistant, Erik Ellegaard Frederiksen (1924-1997), left Penguin on the same day as his mentor, but returned to Penguin in February 1950 to help Schmoller transition into his new job. The tradition of typographic excellence in book design continued at Penguin Books. As Penguin's production director, Schmoller maintained and built upon the design standards and composition rules implemented by Tschichold. During his 25-year tenure, Schmoller carefully modified and adapted the composition rules to reflect the continuous technological developments in the publishing and printing industry. Tschichold commented on his successor by saying: "I am also glad that my work is being well taken care of by H.P. Schmoller, a first-class book designer, and its fundamental lines can now hardly be altered." ⁵

Adherence to his design principles gave Tschichold the time to concentrate on the character of each book and add his personal esthetic touch. Tschichold's tenure at Penguin, during which he designed or prepped for press 500 elegant books—sometimes one per day—was a significant chapter in his career. He could claim to be the first typographer to successfully design and manage, on such a

wide-ranging scale—book series, editors, composers, binders and printers—the mass production of books for a publishing firm.

Late in his career he reflected on his experience and efforts at Penguin Books by saying, “I could be proud,” he wrote, “of the million Penguin books for whose typography I was responsible. Beside them, the two or three luxurious books I have designed are of no importance. We do not need pretentious books for the wealthy, we need more really well-made ordinary books.”⁶

End Notes

¹ Jan Tschichold, Glaube und Wirklichkeit, *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, (June, 1946).

² *Print*, XVIII, No. 1, New York, 1964. Jan Tschichold lecture to The Type Director’s Club, New York, April 18, 1959.

³ Ruari McLean, *Jan Tschichold: typographer*, Mein Reform der Penguin Books, *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, No. 6, 1950 (Boston: David R Grodine, Publisher, Inc., 1975), p. 145.

⁴ Letter to Ruari McLean, Esq. *British Printer*, *The international monthly printing publication*. (Maclean-Hunter Ltd, May 12, 1975), p.1.

⁵ Ruari McLean, *Jan Tschichold: typographer*, Mein Reform der Penguin Books, *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, No. 6, 1950 (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1975), pp. 147.

⁶ Jost Hochuli. *Jan Tschichold, Typographer and Type Designer, 1902-1974*. The English translation of the catalogue is by Ruari McLean, W.A. Kelly and Bernard Wolpe. (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1982), p.35

Penguin Books's design, however, fell far short of their literary reputation. Before Tschichold's arrival, he had requested samples of a number of Penguin books and soon realized that composition rules and standards were virtually nonexistent at the company, as the production department depended on sample pages and different sets of house rules supplied by printers employed by Penguin. In addition, Old Style No. 2, Gill Sans and Times New Roman were the only fonts being utilized throughout all the series. Tschichold decided to set a practical look for Penguin that would suit a large number of books. Visual visionaries | Jan Tschichold. Return to classicism. Left: Tschichold's revision for Penguin covers: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1950. [11] Right: The cover of *Selected Letters* by D. H. Lawrence, Tschichold's second draft for Penguin. [12] Below: Jan Tschichold [13]. He slowly began to embrace more classical design principles. After the war, he reflected back, detecting, "the most shocking parallels between the teachings of Die Neue Typographie and National Socialism and fascism." [9] Tschichold did not want to spread the same ideas that had made him leave Germany. At the end of his time at Penguin, Tschichold and elegant typeface that received much. A hundred books, a contribution that he was very proud of.