Combination Of Traditional And Modernist Typography In Hermann Zapf's Designs

Modernist typography began as a result of a decision to reject the ideas and traditions set out by typographers before. Typography in the past had been utilised in the necessity in which it was both manufactured and produced. The process of printing manuscripts right up to mass production using the printing press had used the same principals as it was needed to create the fonts. In other words: the tools in which the designs were made from coincided with the style of typographic images being made.

After the First World War, the mechanical age was growing and new techniques for production were being introduced and implemented. In Europe, places like the Bauhaus a German art school, like-minded masters of design were educating students about this new design philosophy, but during the war, Adolf Hitler’s German party were suspicious of any rebellious ideas as it may have been considered in opposition to their leadership, By the end of the war, many artists and designers had fled from the conflict to other parts of Europe and had continued their work and had proposed a new philosophy of rejecting old traditions in favour of a simplified non-ornate style as well as creating a universal style than can be appreciated by everyone.

One of the ideas was to design with the emphasis on functionality rather than unnecessary embellishments and the design’s usefulness equal to its beauty. Many modernist type designers and typographers who took this approach, believed that the old tradition of using serifs for type was also not necessary as it was functional in its time, but it was not needed visually to convey the information.

Hermann Zapf was born in Germany in 1918 and died in 2015. Hermann was a typographical designer and calligrapher. “The reputation of Hermann Zapf in twentieth-century graphic design is that of an enlightened traditionalist, interested in working with the historical foundations of typography but also ready to adapt designs for use with new technologies” (Aynsley, 2004)

Hermann designed many typefaces including Optima, Palatino, Fapfino, Chancery and Dingbats as well as many more. Hermann adapted both traditional and modernist approaches to his typefaces. He was self-taught, and around 1938 Hermann he started studying the manuals of Rudolf Koch and Edward Johnston. In 1938 he worked in Rudolf’s son Paul’s workshop learning punchcutting and other techniques of fine printing.

Hermann as a traditionalist designer, also wanted to incorporate modernist principals created typefaces using both serif and sans-serif typefaces. With Hermann’s Optima font family, it can be called a san serif typeface, but it should described as be a serifless roman instead. According to the website myfonts.com: “True to its Roman heritage, Optima has wide, full-bodied characters – especially in the capitals. Only the E, F and L deviate with narrow forms. Consistent with other Zapf designs, the cap S in Optima appears slightly top-heavy with a slight tilt to the right. The M is splayed, and the N, like a serif design, has light vertical strokes. The lowercase a and g in Optima are high-legibility two-storied designs.” (Myfonts.com, 2019)

The features of Optima share their roots with calligraphic seriffed types. “It can generally be

described as a humanist san serif, although its italic variant is more typical of a realist face such as Helvetica, as it is in essence a sloped roman rather that true italic” (Monem, 2008)

Each of these techniques aided Hermann in his designs, from his calligraphic writing styles ” He recently worked with David Siegel, Apple, and Linotype to create Zapfino, a font of his calligraphic handwriting; special features enable it to adapt itself to the text it is displaying.” (Myfonts.com, 2019)

Some modernists wanted to create typefaces that would be simple and legible therefore easy to understand. These include text, display and decorative typefaces. To make an image work well depends on the mixture of these typefaces and how they interact with each other. Hermann designed a typeface called Zapf Dingbats a collection of these characters are called a pi font. “The word comes from an old hand typesetter’s expression, in which to “pi” type was to spill a large quantity of type into a heap, such as pulling out a type drawer too far and dumping its contents. A pi font, then, was one made up of an assortment of possibly unrelated odds and ends.” (Felici, 2012)

The most common use for these characters is for highlighting such as bullet points (bullets lists (•) named after the character for a bullet) “In a bulleted list, the bullet should be followed by a space: either a word space, a thin space, or an en space. Bullets are often used with hanging indents.” (Felici, 2012).

Since a font family may not include a character that is wanted, other characters can be substituted, although the character may have a different baseline, weight or size so the character may have to be adjusted to fit. Unlike traditional typefaces, pi fonts were not designed in tilted forms in the same way a typeface can be designed with an italic typeface.

The influence of these characters when set at a very large size can be lost when placed in contrast to the information that is being portrayed. The main idea is to put across as much information as quick as possible without over saturating the desired effect that is desired. The hierarchy of importance must be followed as in all font sizes to dictate the importance of each piece of information.

The modernist idea to simplify the type down to geometric shapes may have been an important step for the designers, yet Hermann did not completely abandon the traditional way of designing, thus creating a perfect combination of traditional and modernist typography.

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