

WHAT IS TYPO GRAPHY?

DAVID JURY

ESSENTIAL DESIGN HANDBOOKS

RotoVision

What is typography?

“True spontaneity, however, seems to come from
working by rule, but not being bound by it.”

Edward Johnston, Writing, & Illuminating, & Lettering. **1906.**
(**Johnson's emphasis**)



RotoVision

A RotoVision Book

Published and distributed by RotoVision SA
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Switzerland

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

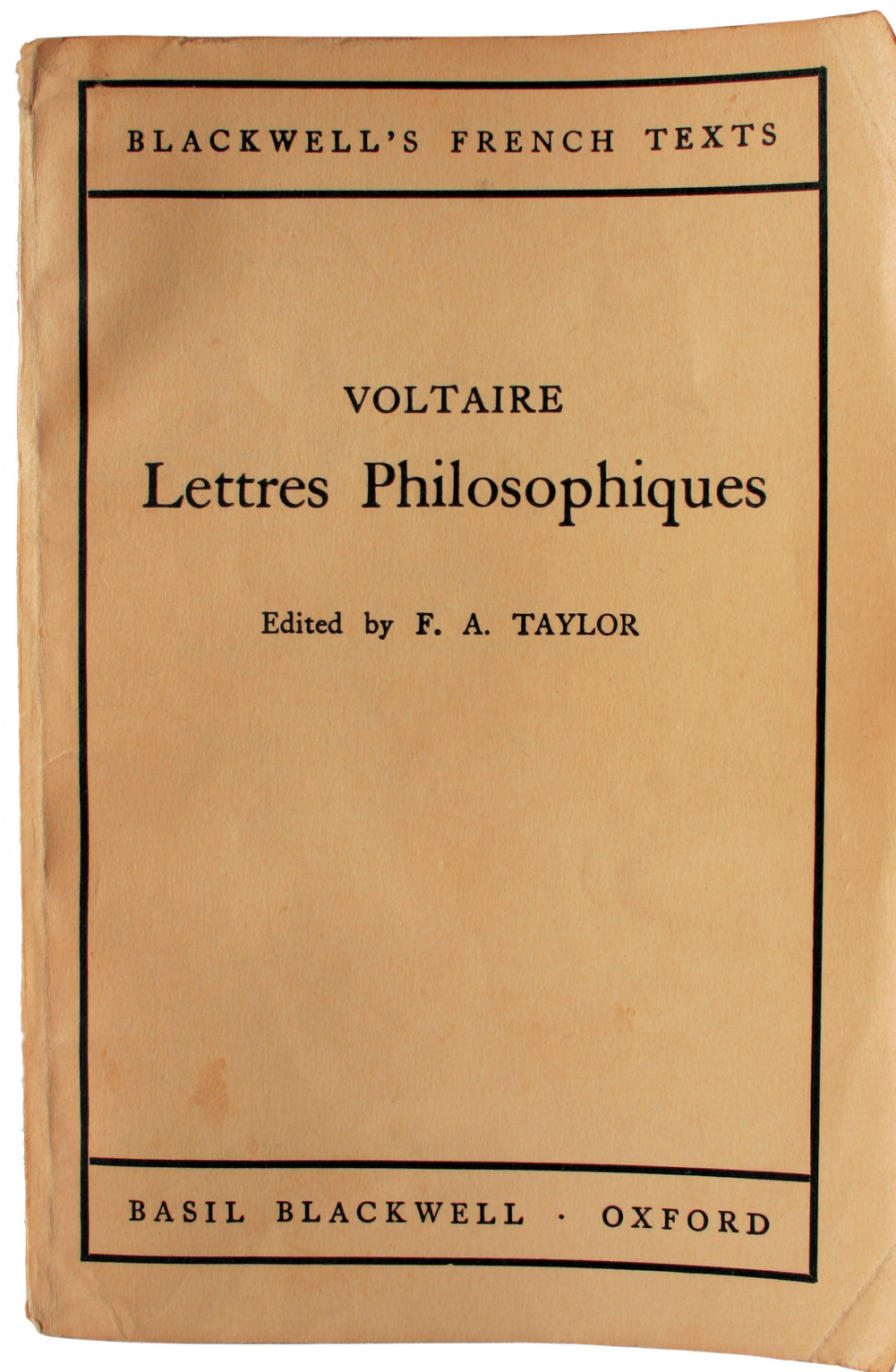
ISBN: 2-88046-822-1

Art Director: Tony Seddon
Designer: David Jury
Reprographics in Singapore by ProVision Pte. Ltd
Tel: +65 6334 7720
Fax: +65 6334 7721

Printing in China by Midas Printing International Ltd

Right: Book cover

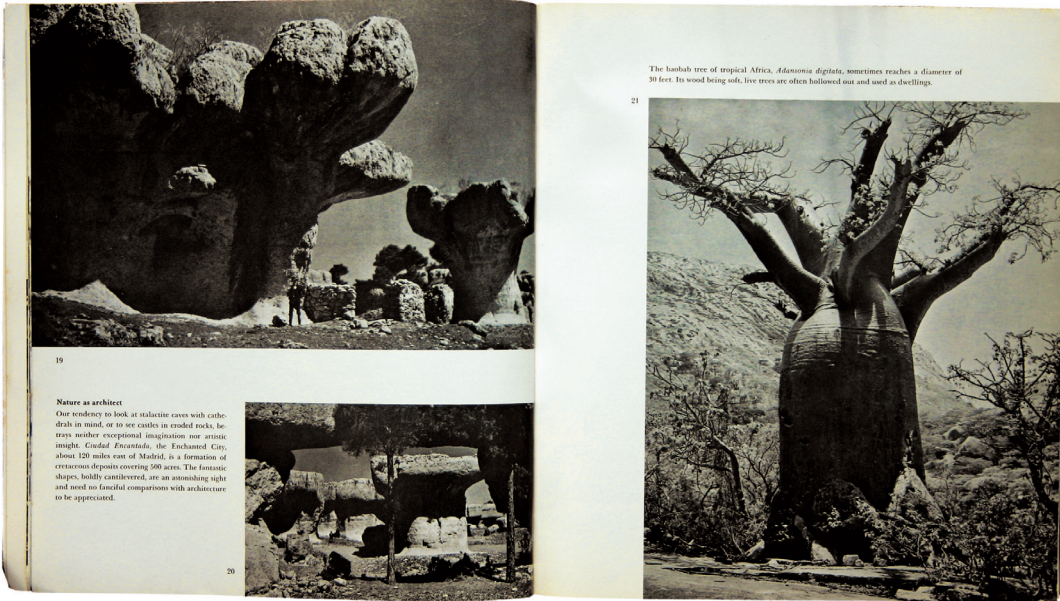
Typography has always been more than the quiet, efficient purveyance of words. Authors also want authority, prestige, integrity, and solemnity. Published 1956.



Foreword

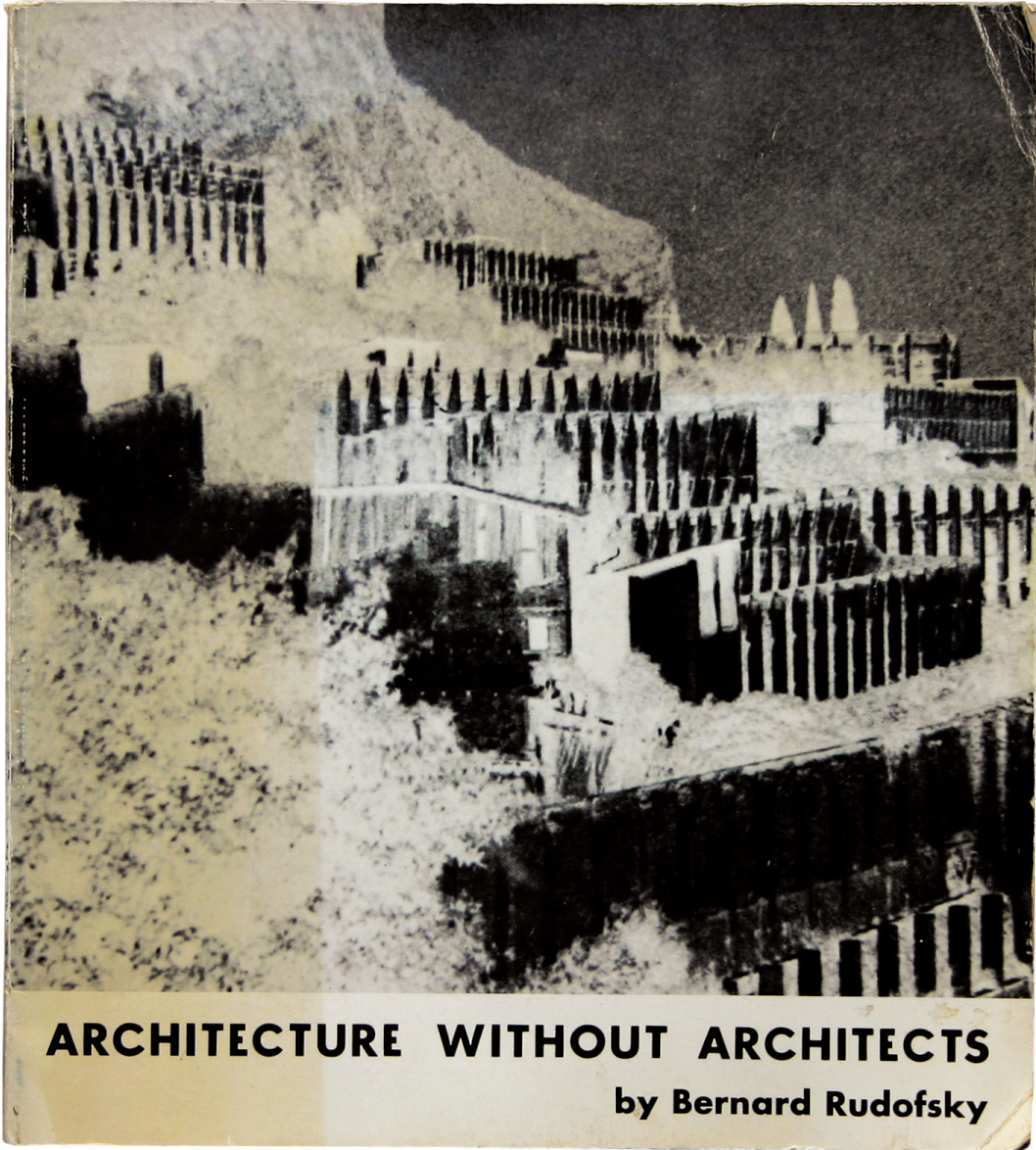
I was intrigued by a catalog I found of an exhibition that took place at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964/1965. Its title is *Architecture without Architects*. The introduction, written by Bernard Rudofsky, attacked the conventional view of architecture which “presents us with a full-dress pageant of ‘formal’ architecture. The discriminative approach of the historian as we know it is equally biased on the social plane ... amounting to little more than a who’s who of architects who commemorate power and wealth ... with never a word about non-pedigreed architecture. This is so little known that we don’t even have a name for it but, we can call it vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural, as the case may be.” The beauty of the dwellings came directly from the natural, local materials which were utilized with a minimum of intervention.

Digital technology has changed the nature of typography by making it something everyone does almost every day. The fact that most people doing typography (both in a professional capacity and recreationally) have no “formal” concept of what they are doing does not make it meaningless or valueless. Quite the opposite. Ad-hoc signs and messages have been, of necessity, concocted by workmen, emergency services, businesses, lovers, and vandals ever since time immemorial. Such material is all around us and, as the title of this book asks the question “what is typography?”, I have taken this opportunity to explore the overlaps, the formal and informal, between typography produced by typographers and typography produced without typographers.



by courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, 2006

Below: Exhibition catalog
The cover and spreads from the catalog accompanying Bernard Rudofsky's exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965.



by courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, 2006

Issues	Anatomy	Portfolios	Etcetera
8 What is typography?	70 Anatomy	152 Portfolios	246 References
14 The nature of typography			249 Glossary of punctuation and letter parts
18 Speaking and typography	72 Semiotics	154 A2-Graphics/SW/HK	250 General glossary
20 Reading and typography	74 Linguistics	160 Paul Belford	252 Further reading
24 Writing and typography	76 Rhetoric	166 Al Mohtaraf	254 Index
28 Change and typography	78 Semantics	172 Atelier David Smith	256 Acknowledgments
32 Authority and convention	80 Graphology	178 Atelier Works	
38 Printing, composing, and house-style manuals		184 Boag Associates	
42 Rules and conventions	82 Legibility	188 Baumann & Baumann	
44 Craft and typography	84 Readability	196 Cartlidge Levene	
48 Hypermedia	86 Spelling	202 David Jury and Fox Ash	
50 Vision impairment	88 Alphabets	208 Jannuzzi Smith	
52 Print for partial sight	90 Punctuation	214 Thirteen	
54 Business communication	92 Numerals	218 Lucienne Roberts @ sans+baum	
60 Rural communication	94 Spatial cues	224 SAS	
64 Urban communication		230 UNA (Amsterdam) designers	
	96 Linear texts	238 Webb & Webb Design	
	100 Justified setting	244 Sam Winston	
	102 Nonarbitrary line breaks		
	104 Ranged-left setting		
	106 Dividing words		
	108 Type on screen		
	110 Nonlinear texts		
	114 Information		
	118 Ephemera		
	122 Novelty		
	128 Lists		
	130 Grids		
	134 Kerning, tracking, and ligatures		
	138 Space between words		
	140 Space between lines		
	142 Space around text		
	144 Italic and sloped letterforms		
	146 Numerals and small caps		
	148 Dashes and virgules		
	150 Parentheses and brackets		

What is typography?

If we were to consider the normal, everyday activities that consume our lives, it would quickly become apparent that typography is ubiquitous and inescapable. For the most part, this material is routine and boring. But it is also, for the most part, essential.

Typography has been traditionally associated with design and, in particular, with the printing industry. However, owing to the universal access to digital technology,¹ the word “typography” is increasingly used to refer to the arrangement of any written material and is certainly no longer restricted to the work of a typographer. Everyone is a typographer now...

“Written” implies first and foremost “handwritten,” but there are clearly many ways of presenting written language using technologies such as the printing press, text messaging, e-mail, ink-jet printer, and even the standard typewriter. The word “typography” subsumes all these methods of communication.

Typography and writing have, quite naturally, always been closely entwined: typography being the discipline and professional practice that mediates between the contents of the message and the receiving readership. Therefore, to understand the grammar of typography, one must also gain a knowledge and understanding of language and how it is adapted to function in various social contexts.



Authority
A sense of authority has little to do with size and a lot to do with precision. This sign above is small, but it is rule governed and, therefore, entirely consistent.

Opposite, top: Centering words is often far from easy. The writer of this sign began with the idea of drawing each letter on a separate plank, but realized after drawing the “P” that he had misjudged the alignment. To rectify his error and maintain the

symmetrical arrangement, he intended to squeeze two letters onto each plank but, after misdrawing the “N,” realized the game was up!
Opposite, bottom: Even when a sign “reiterates precision” it will lose authority if it is not maintained.



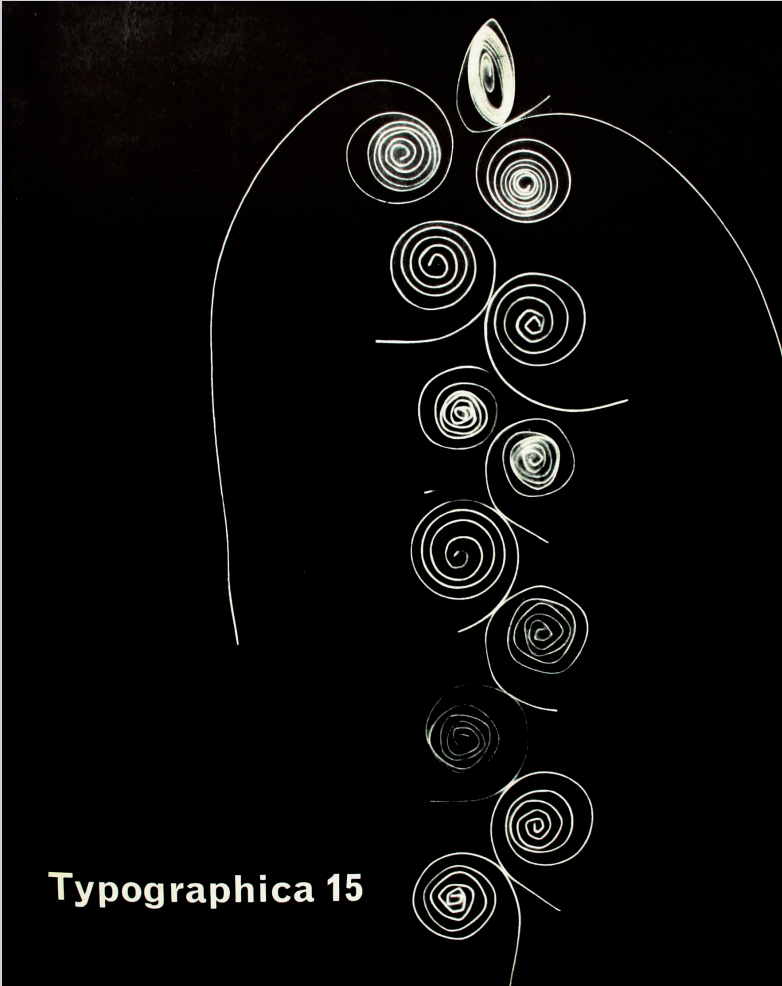
Elementary typographic conventions are introduced in schools. However, little thought is put into explaining where these conventions originate or what exactly they aim to achieve.

Nevertheless, these conventions do carry, if blindly, sound principles: how to draw and then write letterforms clearly; how to present words, sentences, and paragraphs; how to arrange text on a sheet of paper; and how to provide emphasis

where required. A few specific tasks, such as how to lay out a letter and address an envelope, are also achieved, but little more. Even the most elementary principles of visual language are usually ignored and, as a result, most people, when faced with the task of designing a poster or a flyer, discover (often to their surprise) that neither they nor their computer is able to convey the message in the manner they intended.

Consistency of rhythm
Rhythm is a key factor in good typography. This stems directly from those characteristics that make “good” handwriting: equal spaces within and between letterforms.

Right: *Typographica 15* cover with photogram by Brian Foster, 1958.
Opposite: Page from the *Payson, Dunton and Scribner Manual of Penmanship*, New York, 1873.



By contrast, there are several specialist areas of research where studies into various aspects of typography have been undertaken in considerable detail. In particular, there has been minute analysis of the letters of the alphabet and the thousands of forms these letters take. Such specialists include type designers, type manufacturers, historians of printing, historians of inscriptions (epigraphers) and handwriting (paleographers), art and design historians, linguists, psychologists, philosophers, forensic scientists, graphologists, and, of course, typographers. Others (publishers, editors, writers, cartographers, draughtsmen, typists, etc.), whose work requires the organization of information, will also have interesting views on typography.

Although all of these specialists share an interest in the same subject, each has their own rich and complex terminology to explain what they are doing, looking for, and/or finding.

The typographer deals with all matters that affect the appearance of type on the page (or screen, or any other flat or 3-D substrate) and all matters that contribute to the effectiveness of typographic information or discourse. These will include considering the shapes, weights, and sizes of individual letterforms, diacritics, punctuation marks and special symbols (or sorts), the amount of space between characters, words, and punctuation as well as the space between lines, the size of margins, and the position, size, and weight of page headings and associated

page numbers therein, the selection of textual headings and subheadings, reference figures, and reference material. There may also be diagrams or tables to design which will require captions. In addition, the typographer will normally expect to choose the method of printing, the paper, and all matters relating to print finishing such as laminates, spot varnishing, creasing, folding and diecutting, binding, etc.

If the typographer is to create an appropriate ergonomic arrangement of, for example, a complex scientific textbook or a business card, it is helpful to recognize the relationship of social practice and spoken language to typography. Words and images, as well as graphic and typographic conventions, habits, and prejudices, are culturally and historically determined, and together form what we characteristically call “visual language.” The effectiveness (or otherwise) of a form or, more particularly, an understanding of why so many people hate filling in forms, is important to the work of a typographer.

Joseph Moxon, in one of the earliest printing manuals, *Mechanick Exercises* (1683), wrote “A good [typographer] is ambitious as well to make the meaning of his Author intelligent to the Reader, as to make his Work shew graceful to the Eye, and pleasant in Reading: Therefore if his Copy be Written in Language he understands, he reads his Copy with consideration; so that he may get himself into the meaning of the Author, and consequently considers how to order his Work the better both in the Title Page, and in the matter of the book: As how to make his indenting, Pointing, Breaking, Italicking &c. the better sympathise with the Author’s genius, and also with the capacity of the Reader.”²

In attempting to answer the question “What is typography?”, this book will discuss the various ways in which it functions, how it functions, and how these influence the way it finally appears. Typography is a very different subject from what it was just 20 years ago. Digital technology has not only changed how typography is done but also who does it. In the process it has also required the typographer who wishes to “challenge the way we read” instead to “challenge the way we don’t read.”

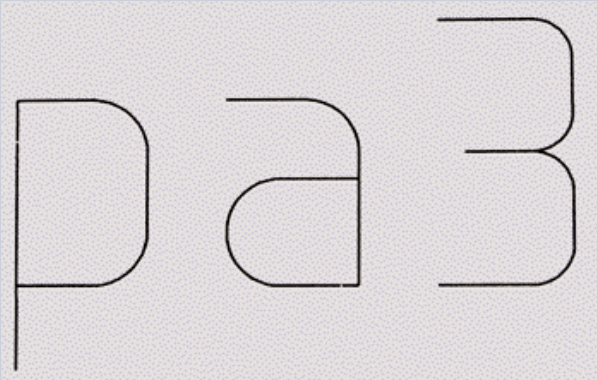
The everyday world in which typography plays an important part is largely invisible. (Until the reader falters at a typo!) For the most part, this is how it should be. This book will emphasize how type hides itself from view by communicating essential and mundane information effectively. In so doing I hope to make strange again that which we have learned too well.³The point is not so much to discuss this fundamental, if elusive subject, as to make such a discussion possible; that is, by means of inquiry, to indicate pathways for further investigation.

Function and technology
Type is often influenced by the technology and purpose for which it is designed.

Opposite, above: Characters from patternmaking software as used in the fashion industry.

Opposite, below: A cash register receipt with characters produced from a dot-matrix configuration.

Opposite, right: Information provided with a Palm Pilot describing how the owner should “write” letterforms in order to be correctly interpreted by the device.



1 8 INCH CAKES
1 REG COFFEE

Letter	Strokes	Letter	Strokes
A	Λ	N	N
B	B B	O	O O
C	C	P	P P
D	D D	Q	Q
E	E	R	R R
F	F F	S	S
G	G G	T	T
H	H	U	U
I	I	V	V V
J	J	W	W
K	K	X	X X
L	L	Y	Y Y
M	M M	Z	Z
Space	—	Back Space	—
Carriage Return	/	Period	tap twice