

Book Reviews

Alphabet Stories by Hermann Zapf

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Hermann Zapf

Introduction

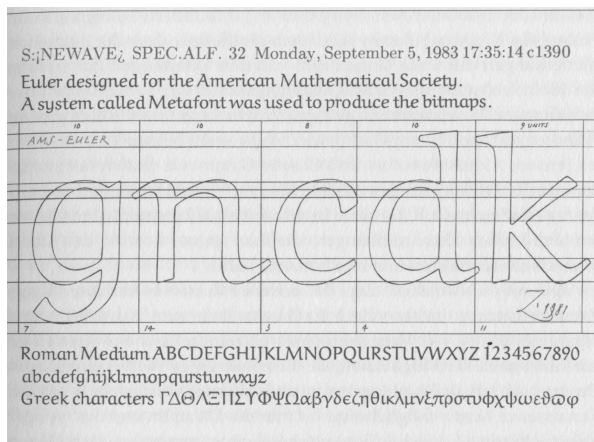
It pays off to be a Dante member! Some time ago each member received a copy of Hermann Zapf's monograph 'Alphabetgeschichten', a gift from Hermann himself. For many users of computers the name 'Zapf' may ring a bell because of the omnipresent Zapf dingbats fonts. But with Hermann Zapf being one of the greatest designers of our time, there is much more to learn about him.

Being an honorary member of Dante, Hermann is quite familiar with $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ and friends, and he is in contact with several $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ ies. He worked with Donald Knuth on the book '3:16', a calligraphic masterpiece. He is also responsible for the design of the Euler font family (we will tell you more about this in an upcoming issue). In the recent font projects (Latin Modern and $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ Gyre) we consult Hermann on matters that we are unsure about.

Two versions

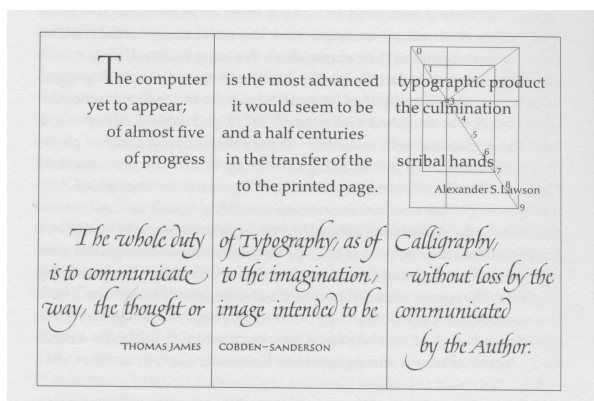
There are two versions of this book, the German version and an English translation and it is a pleasure to have both, especially because they are not entirely the same. The German version has a few more pages than the English translation. And not only because of the language, there are also true differences in the contents.

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Born on November 8, 1918, Hermann has grown up in and been a witness to turbulent times. The German version sheds more light on how difficult it was to survive in these times and how much art was lost in that period. He wrote down nice anecdotes about this era, for instance how the ability to write in 1 mm script impressed his army superiors so much that it kept him out of trouble. Both books have some differences in the graphics that go with that period and in the English version some quotes are shortened.

The English book catches up on its last pages. Since 1977 Hermann Zapf has been an associate professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology. In the postscript to this version the curator describes the influence Hermann has had on them in the past 30 years. At the time we write this review, Hermann is visiting this institute, where he is involved in a calligraphic and typographic display on 27 glass panels surrounding the new facilities.



If you manage to lay hands on a copy, you will notice that it's printed on thick cream-colored paper and very well bound in a dark blue hard cover with gold initials on the front. At the traditional Dante Christmas Party in 2006 in Darmstadt, Herman told the audience that nowadays it's not trivial to get such paper in the quantities needed: most paper plants only produce paper of moderate quality in any bulk. But here, large quantities of special paper were needed; keep in mind that he gave away a free copy to each of the more than 2000 Dante members.

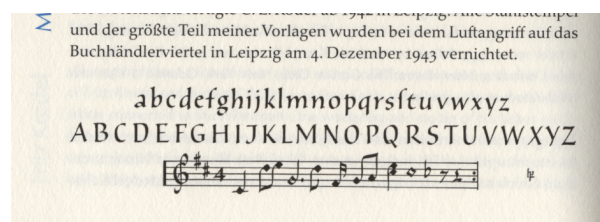
Other interesting differences between the versions are in paragraph breaks and whitespace. As with Dutch, German needs a few more words than English to express ideas, but the general impression is that the German version is the most informative. Other subtle differences are in the technical terms used. The English version qualifies Palatino Sans as 'sans serif', but the German text talks about 'Grotesk'.

A lifetime

One possible reason why Hermann has always been able to catch up with technology and could adapt quite well to the transition from lead to computer, was that originally he wanted to be an 'Elektroingenieur', but calligraphy attracted him more.

Hermann was never stuck on characters only. The book starts with a colorful full-page illustration of flowers and small beetles.

Also, in his early period he created a few 'Notenschriften'. The book shows many examples of handwriting and the grand finale is Zapfino, which is available as a OpenType font with many (complex) features.



Greek, Arabic, you name it . . . he draws it. Among his most well known fonts are Optima and Palatino. Both fonts date back half a century when lead was still leading, but they were recently redesigned to take advantage of new technologies. Last year a sans serif family named Palatino Sans was added, and an Arabic variant is in the making.

The first Optima was drafted on thousand lire



notes in 1950. In 1975, this font was used for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.

Hermann spent quite some time in the USA, running his own company there, teaching at several designer schools and working with Donald Knuth. He is still associated with the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York.

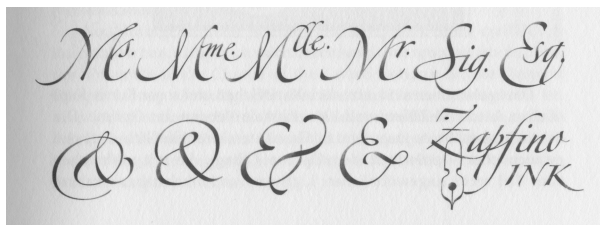
In pdfTeX there is a feature that informally is called 'hz-optimization'. This feature is inspired by the work of Hermann on the 'hz-Programm' and in the book Hàn Thế Thành's work and Hermann's communication with Hàn Thế Thành are explicitly mentioned.

Although an old printing press has a prominent position in his house in Darmstadt, Hermann has always been involved in new technologies. He went from typesetting in lead to using phototypesetters to computer based typesetting. The Zapfino font, that adapts its choice of glyphs to the circumstances, is a prime example of this. Steve Jobs of Apple Computers made sure that on this platform Zapfino behaves as it should.



For those who use the dingbats there is good news as well. The Zapf Essentials are the improved and extended version of these symbols. We now finally have everything available that Hermann originally had in mind when he began drafting this symbol set.

The book also shows samples of Zapfino Ink, yet another innovation. Here color and shades make their way into the font but we have to wait till the font technologies are ready for that. The book tells us that this is being worked on.



The book is typeset in Palatino Nova with displayed quotations in the brand new Palatino Sans. In the not too wide margin keywords are typeset. These are rotated 90 degrees and printed in blue, which adds a very nice touch to the book's typographic feel. Especially so where the keyword in question is actually a font name, because each of those is typeset in the font that is indicated.

Afterword

At the Dante Christmas Party 2006 we showed Hermann some of his work on a digital ink device and he seemed quite impressed with what new technologies can provide. However we fully agree with the following quote from his monograph:

Ein gedruckter Buchstabe und ein schön gestaltetes Buch sind etwas Beständiges, Bleibendes im Vergleich zu dem schnellen Zugriff zu einer Information im Internet und dessen Flüchtigkeit der Wiedergabe am Bildschirm. Es ist das etwas schwer zu beschreibende eigenartige Erlebnis des Lesers, wenn er ein Buch in seiner Händen hält. Ein Buch spricht die Sinne an, der Druck auf dem Papier, das Umblättern der Seiten, ganz im Gegensatz zu der abstrakten elektronischen Darstellung eines Textes.¹



Both language versions of the monograph can be ordered directly from the Merchandise section of the Linotype website, <http://www.linotype.com/26/merchandise.html>.

If you prefer to order elsewhere, the ISBN number is 3-9810319-5-4 for 'Alphabetgeschichten', or 3-98103129-6-2 for 'Alphabet Stories'.

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¹ The printed letter—or a well-designed book—is something very unique compared to the fleeting resolution of a screen and quick access on the Internet. A book offers a happy feeling in the hands of the reader and is quite different from an abstract presentation of text.