During the nascent years of modernism in the early '20s and '30s, certain eminent designers in Europe and the United States delighted in telling other designers how, and what, to design. These self-appointed prophets were so convinced they had discovered graphic design’s holy grail—rightness of form—that they wanted everyone in eye- and earshot to revel in their revelations. To spread the word (and image), they issued sermons from the mount in the form of verbose manifestos and detailed manuals. Most proved inconsequential; a few, such as W.A. Dwiggins’s Layout in Advertising and Jan Tschichold’s Die Neue Typografie (The New Typography), both published in 1928, endured. The former laid out rigid rules...
The page was already decorative by virtue of the design of the type. It enlarged its decorative scope further by permitting the use of ornament. To ornamental letters, decorative engravings, cut with the text, were added.

Arrangement has established a classic. In order to go a step further, and to study of possible combinations, it became necessary to develop the alternative of a scheme of arrangement. At this point we come to the modern, particularly to the technique of intaglio, to which the term refers in reference to its photographic nature. Intaglio, by definition, is an intimate juxtaposition and even superimposed illustrations is permissible.

The main forms of printing—relief and intaglio, which is based on the antipathy of ink and water, appeared at the beginning of the century. The different ways of using intaglio, obtained either by letterpress or from great freedom in the composition of the proofs to the facility with which proofs can be made.

Photographs by Brad Dickson
TOLMER SINGLE-HANDEDLY SMOOTHED THE EDGES OFF ORTHODOX MODERNISM, MAKING ONCE-RADICAL CONCEPTS PALATABLE FOR BUSINESS AND THE MASSES.

A comparison of works produced at different epochs or in countries with different systems of writing serves to define the principles on which the decorative use of words should be based: imposing also certain limits, for the same result cannot be successfully obtained in all cases, irrespective of nationality. It is impossible, for instance, to take the same liberties with our alphabetic writing as the Egyptian scribe took with his hieroglyphs.

The modern art of layout has escaped from the tenets of ornament which gripped the back during those expansive periods of decoration whose legacy is the Renaissance Rococo and Gothic Romanic styles, and the "Art Nouveau" of 1900.

There is a danger of going astray in applying the lessons provided by a study of the art of the past. Its value to us must reside in enabling us to establish the laws which produce its harmony, its balance of mass and volume, its play of values, its coordination of crowded spaces and empty spaces.

It is our job to make the transposition of these values in such a way as to enrich our own work:
of contemporary advertising design; the latter foretold progressive styles that actually took hold.

But it was another, more commercially oriented book that defined the period’s new mainstream aesthetic and became, arguably, the design bible of all design bibles. In 1932, French printer and designer Alfred Tolmer published *Mise en Page: The Theory and Practice of Layout* in separate English and French editions. (Dwiggins’s and Tschichold’s books at that time were only published in English in the United States and in German in Germany, respectively.) The book codified the most widely practiced of all the early-20th-century design styles. Advertised in the leading design journals and sought after by European and American advertising artists, *Mise en Page* (the French term for layout) was a lavishly printed primer of that strain of design then called moderne, and subsequently dubbed art deco.

Tolmer’s tome was an ambitious and alluring treatise on contemporary style. His goal was to position deco in history and provide formal guidelines while encouraging opportunities for inventive design options. With slip sheets, tip-ons, embossed and debossed pages, and fold-outs, the book itself was a model of eclectic mastery, a template for all designers who wanted to be on the crest of a stylish wave.

In his book, Tolmer co-opted fundamental aspects of modernism for commercial application. Photomontage, then considered the foremost progressive design conceit (László Moholy-Nagy called it “mechanical art for a mechanical age”), holds pride of place in Tolmer’s hierarchy. “Photography gives concrete form to the subtlest thoughts,” he wrote. “It has the gift of imparting the dullest, most mechanical and impersonal things the sensitiveness and poetry which admits them into our dreams.” These words may be more flowery than those found in the typical modernist manifesto, but they are no less committed to a cause. And they exemplify how Tolmer single-handedly smoothed the edges off orthodox modernism, making once-radical design concepts palatable for business and the masses.

First spread: Dynamic composition with skewed text blocks and overlapping, streamlined letters is juxtaposed with a stylized, posterized illustration of a cigar-smoking gent.

Opposite: Tolmer compared hieroglyphs to contemporary page designs to show the roots of visual communications.

Above: Anything goes in the moderne layout, from justified text blocks to contoured patterns of type.
ALONG THE ROAD
Tolmer, who died in 1957, is not as well known today as Dwiggins or Tschichold, but he played a significant role in the French printing and advertising industries. He was the third generation of the prestigious Parisian printing house Maison Tolmer, which produced some of the most stylish graphics in France for luxe publications and packaging, fashioning a diverse array of exquisitely conceived printed commercial products, from elegant boxes to advertising posters and publicity brochures. In addition to overseeing the output of his family’s firm, Tolmer edited art books and catalogs, and illustrated covers for magazines and children’s books: a true design auteur.

While his writing was a bit strained (maybe a result of a poor English translation), he did his utmost to present solid intellectual arguments for why modern/moderne design was the perfect form for the age. Tolmer began by posing the idea that writing and design are one and the same. “The art of layout,” he wrote, “is born at the moment when man feels the urge to arrange in an orderly fashion the expression of his thoughts. The first writing is a decorative setting in itself, a symbolic decor closely connected with the decor that is purely ornamental.”

This vivid presentation of moderne design appeared at exactly the right moment. The visual genre was introduced to the world in Paris at the “Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes” in 1925, and the new, ornamental sensibility quickly became the vogue for all the applied arts throughout the industrialized and commercialized world. A style of affluence at the outset, deco trickled down to the bourgeoisie, skirting the ideological overlays of its mingled modernist traits. Cubist, Futurist, Constructivist, De Stijl, even Bauhaus elements were absorbed by moderne: Rectilinear geometries and sans-serif typefaces combined with stark ornamental patterns such as sun rays, lightning bolts, motion lines, and other symbols of Machine Age progress.

Between the world wars, design entrepreneurs like Tolmer understood that, given the ebbs and flows in European and American consumption brought about by the financial roller coaster of the world markets, this kind of high style was needed to position goods. Styling was touted by marketing and advertising experts as a tool of allure that encouraged sales.

For all its popularity, *Mise en Page* was not always easy to obtain. The book earned a reputation that far exceeded its initial French edition of 1,500, as well as comparable English-language editions that were simultaneously released by prestigious London design publisher Studio Books and New York–based William Rudge (the publisher of the original PRINT). Each edition reportedly sold out within three months of release, but designers without access to the original were able to read it through excerpts in leading trade magazines like the German *Gebrausgraphik* and French *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*.

*Mise en Page*’s astute sampling of modernistic methodologies convinced contemporary designers they were essential: With Tolmer’s boost, deco lasted more or less until World War II and has resurfaced perennially ever since. A rash of deco pastiche followed a 1966 retrospective, “Les Années ’25,” held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris; and, as many will remember with a grimace, the ’80s were awash in the aquas and pinks of what *New York Times* critic Herbert Muschamp has called “Dead Deco.” Today, original moderne artifacts are displayed in blockbuster shows (like one in 2003 at the Victoria & Albert Museum that traveled to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) and nods to deco routinely appear in contemporary graphic design, most recently in retro ads for Amtrak and Hennessy.

Tolmer’s guide may be long out of print, but its influence is evergreen.