

# FIRST ON DECO

A Parisian printer's opus from the '30s contains the origins of a design staple.

By Steven Heller

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

This rectilinear and standard of lay-out. obtain a greater variety necessary to abandon or at all events to do obliques and curves. technique, and more modern advertising.

Henceforward, whether or the mould of a wide number of impressions every freedom of composition.

In the process in which photogravure is applied origin, the free and independent imposition of type.

Apart from the two intaglio — lithography between greasy inks and of the XIXth. century lithography, from the transfer of proof or copperplate, permanent of the page, thanks can be transferred on

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, illustrative engravings, cut with the text, were added.

arrangement has established a classic  
In order to go a step further, and to  
ty of possible combinations, it became  
the horizontal and vertical scheme,  
develop the alternative of a scheme of  
At this point we come to the modern  
e particularly to the technique of

ther dealing with the lead of linotype,  
whole page from which an indefinite  
ons are required, one can practise  
position within the defined area.  
olving intaglio, to which the term  
ied in reference to its photographic  
intimate juxtaposition and even super-  
and illustrations is permissible.  
main forms of printing — relief and  
y, which is based on the antipathy  
and water, appeared at the beginning  
tury. The different ways of using  
irect drawing with ink or chalk, to  
ofs obtained either by letterpress  
it great freedom in the composition  
s to the facility with which proofs  
n the stone.



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 lay-out has escaped from the tentacles of ornament which gripped the book during those expansive periods of decoration whose legacy is the Renaissance, Rococo and Gothic romantic 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:

Sarcophagus of the priest T'aho (Saite epoch). The graphic character of the writing resembles the decorative style of the whole. Their coordination is solely due to a geometrical organization which leads the eye horizontally and vertically through the complex elements of which this page is composed.

sur les rochers du Val Fontanaba et dans les Apennins. La disposition par carrés a servi, comme nous l'avons vu, aux scribes assyriens pour le groupement des caractères cunéiformes de la première époque. La voici de nouveau apportant son ordre et sa simplicité à l'art khmer, dans l'empreinte du pied d'un Bouddha d'Angkor-Vat où s'inscrivent les signes sacrés. Ailleurs encore, l'écriture aztèque utilise, pour la mise en page d'un calendrier religieux et divinatoire (Tonolamath), un carrelage régulier en tenant compte de ce que nous appelons aujourd'hui en langage cinématographique le *gros plan* et dont on retrouve le principe dans l'esthétique décorative de beaucoup de pays, en particulier en Egypte, dans les monuments et les papyrus, en France, dans tout l'art religieux du moyen âge et en Perse dans les miniatures. Les inscriptions en écriture calculiforme, telles qu'on peut les voir sur les bas-reliefs du sanctuaire du Temple de la Croix de Palenqué, obéissent également à une géométrie carrelée, au milieu de laquelle se détache le décor. Cette géométrie nous la retrouverons enfin dans maintes images populaires du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle dont nous aurons par ailleurs l'occasion de reparler.

On pourrait ainsi grouper autour de chaque figure géométrique un ensemble de décors de styles les plus divers, mais une telle classification paraîtrait sans doute fastidieuse. Il suffit qu'on se dise que bien des architectures et bien des compositions picturales réduites à une simple expression géométrique révéleraient le même point de départ, le même schéma linéaire et que ce schéma pourrait devenir encore le point de départ d'une formule de mise en page.

L'art de la mise en page peut donc puiser partout l'inspiration de ses géométries : sur la façade d'un building, comme sur un pot de faïence. L'œil exercé verra les fenêtres s'envoler pour laisser la place à des images et les fleurs bleues de Delft s'exfolier devant l'arrivée d'un bataillon minuscule de caractères de composition.

CALLIGRAPHIE  
 Bien qu'il soit possible de pouvoir suivre ses transformations de la mise en page, de tous ceux qui ont traité ici pour que nous la marche de son évolution de vue qui nous occupe. Il n'y a d'y avoir recours afin d'en relatives au rôle que peut jouer en page moderne.

Nous avons vu par une note précédente la formation de quelques écritures au détriment de la pureté archaïque du grec à l'écriture cursive des papyrus. Or, c'est ce produit pour la formation de l'écriture typographique. Partie, dès les premiers jours, d'une imitation de l'écriture gothique telle qu'elle était de la première moitié du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'imprimerie a simplifié ses caractères et à leur de leur aspect cursif. C'est de Lactance, composé en caractères de Jenson, que date la naissance d'une nouvelle typographie actuelle. Jean Monnaie de Tours, avant de typographie à Saint-Bénédictins, où de l'écriture romaine fut fondre les caractères fut composé. Si les premiers Gutenberg manuscrits butent sur cette po-

avant que fut inventé le caractère mobile, les xylographes primitifs passaient des mains de l'imprimeur aux mains d'enlumineurs chargés de camoufler de leur mieux l'aspect mécanique des pages en ajoutant aux lettrines des fioritures, des arabesques, des fleurettes et ces feuilles de vignes d'où fut tiré plus tard le nom de vignette. Les enlumineurs dessinaient eux-mêmes, le plus souvent, ces lettrines dont la place était réservée sur la planche. Ils avaient une habileté tout orientale à tracer cette élégante capitale appelée

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

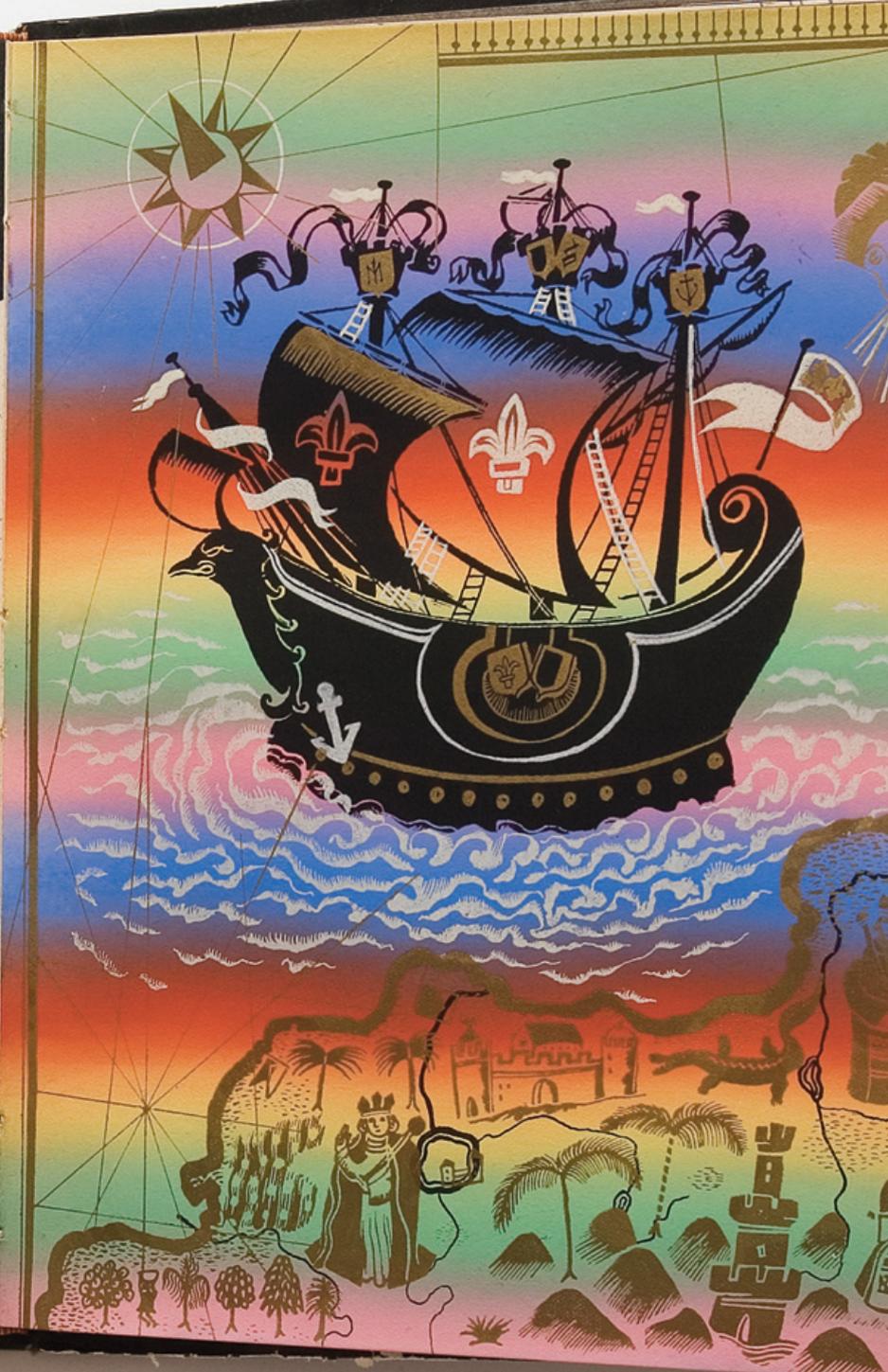
layout) was a lavishly printed primer of that strain of design then called moderne, and subsequently dubbed art deco.

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.





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

**Left:** In addition to typographic novelty, Tolmer advocated the marriage of classical and moderne imagery and color. Here, he blends drawing and photomontage, his version of "mechanical age" art.

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. **P**