Mind Your P's and Q's

An Exploration of Typography on the Letterpress

By Megan Weeks

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An Honors Thesis by
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Abstract:

I felt this creative project should be a culmination of my education in both graphic design and fine art at Ball State University. To incorporate both of these aspects, I chose to apply my knowledge of typography and design to the printing and bookmaking techniques I have learned in my printmaking classes. After conducting research on general guidelines of typography and layout, I decided to illustrate and define ten basic principles of design. I felt these ten ideals represented the core foundation of most design. A page that demonstrates each principle typographically precedes the definitions.

This project has given me a better understanding of the sensitivity of typography. It has also increased my appreciation for both the efficiency and flexibility of designing on a computer, and the unique characteristics specific to rough wooden type and hand bound books.

Artist Statement

In my education at Ball State I have been exposed to
both fine arts classes and design study. I have come to the
conclusion that there is not a distinct difference between
the two. I use elements of design in my studio work, and my
work in visual communication has been strengthened by my
studio courses. Graphic design is often perceived as merely
a commercial endeavor. However, I believe this type of work
and more traditional art are one in the same. There is a
beauty in letterforms and typography. Recently, I have been
captivated by the character of wood type and accidental
blobs of ink that can only be achieved through manually
setting type on the letterpress. This exploration has
strengthened my belief in the parallel between art and
design.

Image is very powerful and commanding and is often the
first thing viewers notice. I greatly appreciate the impact
of a stunning image; however, I also think there is nothing
more exciting than creative typography. This aspect of
design can be overlooked when paired with imagery. For this
reason, I decided to make this book solely text based. I
didn't want an exploration of letterforms and hand set type
to be shadowed by imagery.

I created an edition of ten artist's books using the
letterpress technique. I set the letterforms by hand, rolled
ink onto them, and printed them on paper. This technique is
not often a part of the graphic design process today. It is
thought of as more of a specialty printing method. However,
graphic design and advertising were born on the letterpress.
The first printing presses had a tremendous influence on
literacy and formed the way we communicate today. The
printing process has been used to make both literature and
art prints more accessible to the public. I wanted to

explore this aspect of design that is often skimmed over in history classes. In fact, most designers today are taught design solely on a digital platform. I feel that printing in this direct way helped give me a better understanding of typography and the technique that continues to have a huge impact on design. This knowledge can be translated to the generation of type on the computer, and has already begun to enhance my design work.

This book was intended to mainly serve my own personal growth and to be a visually interesting work of art. I am pleased with the visual outcome, and I have acquired a substantial amount of knowledge about typography. This includes a better understanding of the vocabulary used in computer layout programs that originated from letterpress terminology. However, it has also started a dialogue with other designers about their personal opinions about design, and the role letterpress plays in today's design process.

Designing, printing, and binding these books broadened my approach toward design. The quality I achieved by printing type on a textured paper was exciting and thought provoking. The results of my experimentation with ink, different paper, and metal and wood type cannot be achieved through manipulation on the computer. The finished product was stimulating and will be a source of inspiration for my future endeavors in design. The visual communication program at Ball State incorporates fine art with graphic design by requiring graphic design students to take both types of classes. This piece also incorporates design with the fine arts and is an appropriate representation of my time in the program. The ten letterpress books are a culmination of my study of design and art and a jumping board for future work.

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