

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 3

“Quite Too Awful”

Throughout the period of artistic printing, printers’ trade journals and the specimen exchanges cautioned against the excessive use of ornament and counseled regarding the choice of “correct” decoration. In 1887, the eighth *Printers’ International Specimen Exchange* noted that perusal of its submissions revealed that “designs that are offensive to good taste and incongruous in ornamentation are...sufficiently numerous to call for protest.”

A year later, the *American Art Printer* advised: “Be sure that in the matter of form, everything shall be in keeping. Avoid the distortion of relative proportions or you will unconsciously drift into an overuse or wild misuse of ornament, and consequently into some bizarrerie of coloring.” Despite their reservations, however, the authorities never gave up ornament altogether, and the manipulation of liberal amounts of ornament remained a defining characteristic of artistic printing. Hope remained for the discovery of tasteful congruities, and heavily ornamented print design continued into the 1890s.

Graphic design at the end of the nineteenth century followed three paths: it turned to art nouveau, became historical, or persisted in being “artistic.” Despite the popularity of William Morris’s medievalism and of the Vienna secessionism’s colorful geometries, the use of ornament of any kind in print design faced reappraisal. Asian-style and exotic ornament faded away, except in some art nouveau work, which never found widespread expression in British and American graphic design. Ornament in the historical style had a dark, thick, medieval or antique quality, as if imitating woodcuts. Some of the last typographic combination borders produced depicted eighteenth-century characters or heavy, tightly curled lines that resembled antique metalwork. Typeface design in America had a burst of experimental vigor, first becoming extremely loose and fluid, like scrawled handwriting, then reverting almost completely to revivals of pre-nineteenth-century unornamented typefaces. Typesetting, especially in book design, pulled in on itself with tightened spacing, leaving wider, unadorned margins.

With the changes in design came changes in the professional network supporting the industry, and artistic printing lost its advocates. Some of the trade journals

that had supported the style and paraded the confections created with rule twisters and wrinklers ceased publication. Specimen exchanges of artistic printing ended; the *American Printers’ Specimen Exchange* stopped, for example, because of a shortage of submissions.³ During the 1890s, printing-trade journals lost some of their proselytizing zeal and turned to showcasing anodyne halftone photographs of children, attractive young ladies, and pets. The number of fantastic, multicolored specimens of artistic printing declined. In 1892, the American typefounding industry, source of much artistic ornament, was shaken by the consolidation of twenty-three foundries—that would have been almost every major foundry in the country—into one amalgamation, the American Type Founders Company. While some firms continued independently for a time, specifically advertising that they were not party to the great merger, type foundries lost much of their authority as purveyors and disseminators of taste.

During the time of artistic printing’s popularity, publishing as a whole had been evolving into a more standardized industry. Advertising in an increasingly crowded marketplace required promotions of high impact and low cost. Business considerations often led printers to adopt stock display conventions, and type treatments, and easily handled incidental ornament. From a simple technological standpoint, delicate curled rules, whisper-thin typefaces, and involved experimentation did not fare well with the faster and higher-capacity steam- and gas-powered presses that catered to the increased commercial demand. In part, America’s leadership in printing technology led to artistic printing’s obsolescence.

The younger generation of designers, printers, and artists coming to prominence in America at that time appeared to rebel against the established order. Influential American designer and illustrator Will Bradley (1868–1962) was influenced by European art nouveau, while typographically he was drawn to unornamented faces such as Caslon. Although he began his career in a small-town newspaper shop in the 1880s, likely amidst all the trappings associated with artistic job printing, Bradley turned his back on the “novelty” typefaces of his youth.⁴