

The Influence of Artists' Books and Publications On Graphic Design

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Abstract

I would like to present the argument that artists working in the book form, from William Blake, through William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and the Kelmscott Press, and later the Bauhaus, Dadaists, Supremacists and Futurists, through the Russian Constructivists and their contemporaries, have influenced book design. Using this history I would like to argue that these artists' books and publications have had a large influence on the graphic design of their period and beyond. Artists' books and graphic design are often inextricably intertwined.

What Are "Artists' Books"?

There is a long history of artists making books and using books as a creative medium. "Artists' books" are books that are not used as ways of reproducing pre-existing texts and images but they are used as the time-based art medium itself. It is a very small but rich part of the art world that tends to fall between the cracks, not quite fitting into printmaking or photography or the mainstream art gallery world. As the great Mexican book artist, critic and book-art theoretician, Ulises Carrión, wrote in *The New Art of Making Books*: "A book is a sequence of spaces. Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment –a book is also a sequence of moments. A book is not a case of words, nor a bag of words, nor a bearer of words. ... A book is a space time sequence. ... Books existed originally as containers of literary texts. But books, seen as autonomous realities, can contain any (written) language, not only literary language, or even any other system of signs. ..." ¹ Carrión's call to artists to use the book form as creative medium is as inspiring today as it was in 1976, when it was written.

There is a great deal of activity in artists' book making today, and it is not usually considered part of graphic design but more part of the fine art world by designers –and the artists themselves. The fine art world does not always know what to do with this strange hybrid art form. Do artists' books belong in design collections, in museum and university libraries rather than their fine art printmaking collections, or the primary museum fine art collection? The line is often fuzzy, not only today, but historically.

I would like to outline here how 'fine artists' working initially in traditional fine art media, but who have migrated to the book form, and whom we would today call "artists' book-makers", have ended up influencing the way the book itself is conceived in the book design field during the period of 1880 to 1940. This happened in most aspects of book creation, from typography, to image and to the structural form of the books themselves. Because of space and time restrictions here, I have had to end my examples in the period before the Second World War.

Early Artists' Books

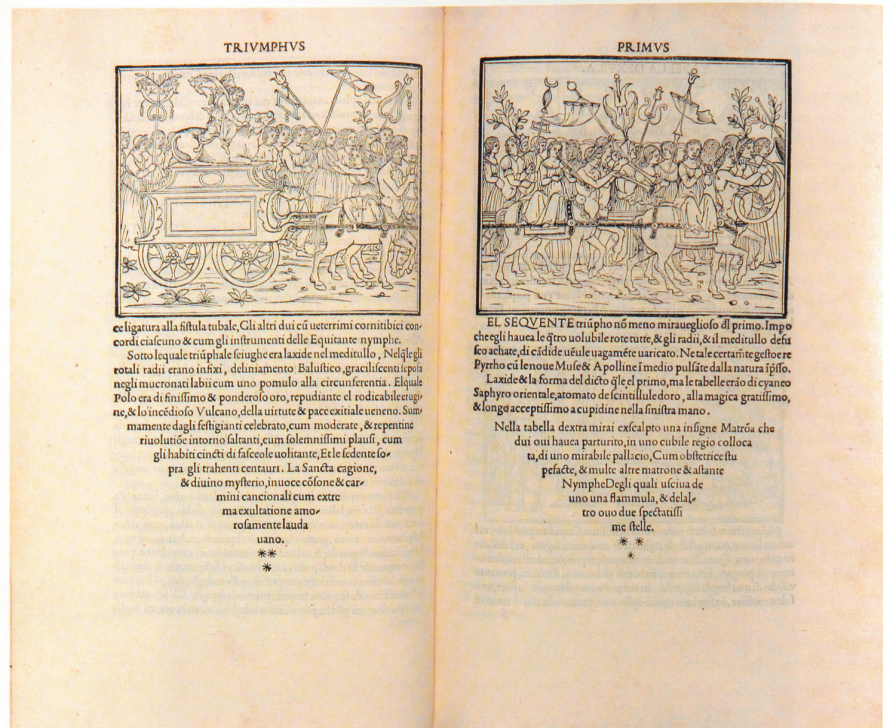
The *idea* of the "artists' book" does not become a conscious concept or movement until the latter part of the twentieth century, but artists who have used the book form as their creative medium go back at least as far as William Blake. In the 18th century, Blake, in addition to traditional paintings and prints, created many editioned book works that were made and conceived for the book form alone. Blake's book works

follow all the general characteristics of what we call “artists’ books” today. What follows is an illustration of four pages of his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* of 1794.



Of course, “graphic design” barely existed as a named profession before the thirties. There were advertising firms that created promotional and advertising print pieces as well as product packaging, but the field of book design was usually a very conservative practice handled by a publisher in-house. As Clifton Meador, the new head of the graduate Book Arts program at Columbia College in Chicago, said recently in his excellent essay called *The Small Pond* ², “In one thread of its history, book design is a codified, even ossified, tradition. Codex-style books have been made since the fourth century, and the design of books became conventionalized very early. Books from a thousand years ago seem easily recognizable and usable as books. Typography starts as a practice about five hundred years ago and has been a remarkably stable way of thinking about creating visual form for communication. Correct book typography, (there is hardly another aesthetic practice where one could talk about correct anything, is there?) in this model, was worked out centuries ago, and we must not tamper with that sacred tradition. From Tschichold to Bringhurst, this is a very strong idea in design.”

A prime example of that would be one of the most beautifully designed books of all time, Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, 1499, designed and printed by Aldus Manutius.



As Johanna Drucker has noted in *The Century of the Artists' Book*³, "Many printers, typographers, and publishers were acutely aware of the book as a form and displayed this awareness through their productions." Drucker cites Manutius' work as an example of highly self-conscious production of work in book form. She continues, "One can draw on their virtues, their innovative or compelling solutions to technical or design problems, and their aesthetic resolution of relations between elements of text, image, printing technology, paper, binding, as well as their substantive content. But these works are not, in any real sense, artists' books. A very simple distinction can be brought into play here: an artist's book should be a work by an artist self-conscious about book form, rather than merely a highly artistic book. [Manutius does] not serve as a point of departure for conceptualizing the artist's book, one whose philosophical and poetic legacy is an integral part of its identity." Drucker goes on to concur that the earliest precedents for artists' book-making are by the 18th and 19th century English artists, William Blake, previously noted here, and later William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones of the Kelmscott Press. All of these artists came out of the traditional painting and printmaking disciplines. (Morris was notorious for throwing himself with great enthusiasm into almost every possible artistic discipline, including weaving.) Below is one of their finest collaborative efforts, *The Kelmscott Chaucer*, which, ironically, made stylistic references to earlier illuminated books that were hand-calligraphed and painted in monasteries throughout Europe, not exactly a modern tradition.



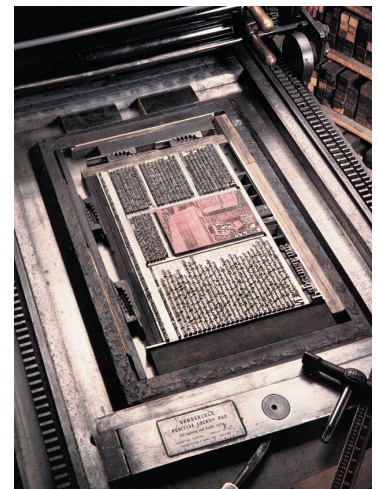
Far more interesting to me than Morris and Burne-Jones, though less influential, is the American Gelett Burgess, who was a light-hearted nose-tweaker at the turn of the nineteenth century. Many of the publications that he produced or co-produced made fun of the bourgeoisie and the status quo. One of his most famous and innovative works was a little book called *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, produced in 1896 with his friend Porter Garnett. Johanna Drucker has a lengthy section on this late nineteenth century Californian, and quotes Burgess as saying that the intention of *Le Petit Journal* was to: "send out a rollicking, whooping gabble of ultra nonsensical verbiage, eschewing seriousness in any form." I really like the playfulness of Burgess' work and one of its most interesting features was that it was printed on

old wallpaper (something the Russian Constructivists did a lot of thirty years later) and the oblique eccentric shape of the volume. When the book is opened up, it looks like the book recedes in perspective. This is a trick that Kevin Osborn used in the 1980s and has more recently been done by other designers. Below is this innovative 1896 book:



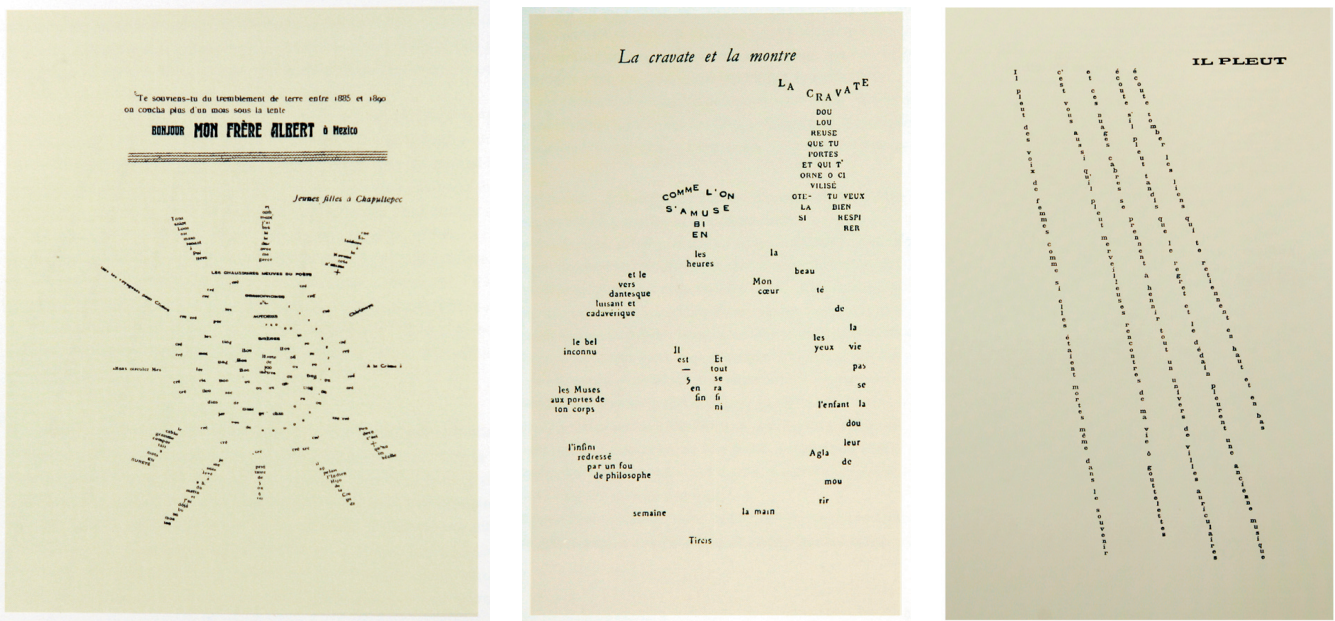
Breaking the Structural Grid

One of the most strongest influences that artists' books had on typography came from the metaphysical poets such as Stephane Mallarmé, and later the poets and artists who formed the Supremacists and Futurist movements. Ellen Lupton, the well known curator and design educator, writing in *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age* ⁴, observed that, "The traditional aesthetic of letterpress is governed by a battalion of gridded structures, from the printer's archive of prefabricated forms to the rectangular support of the 'chase,' a frame in which parallel lines of type are locked together, hemmed in by blank blocks of 'furniture' that establish margins and open spaces."



Mallarmé, and the many other artists and poets, (such as Apollinaire,) who followed from the various artistic movements of the time, managed to break the restrictive right-angled perpendicular grid imposed by the nature of type and conventional letterpress 'furniture.' They did this by setting the type in improvised non-traditional furniture and forms, finding new ways to lock down the type for printing. They also used linoleum cuts for some of the image elements and larger display type. This allowed them to make the type far more expressive and gave it a whole new look not associated with the restrictions of tradi-

tional letterpress. A lot of the work of that period still looks surprisingly fresh and very modern. Here are a few examples from Guillaume Apollinaire, the first two are from 1914, the third is from 1916:

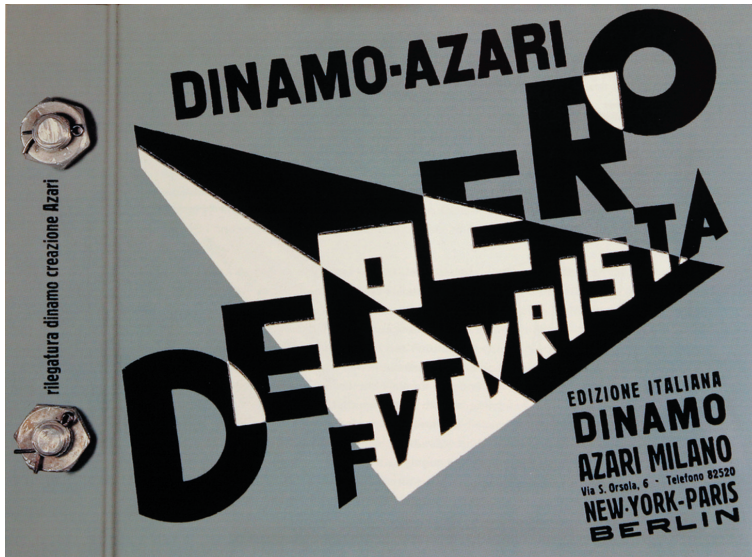


The Futurists, Supremacists and Dadaists were also very involved in making books with expressive type. There is only room here for a few examples from each country. Below is some work from books by Francesco Cangiullo on the left (1916) and by the prolific Filippo Marinetti (1919) on the right.

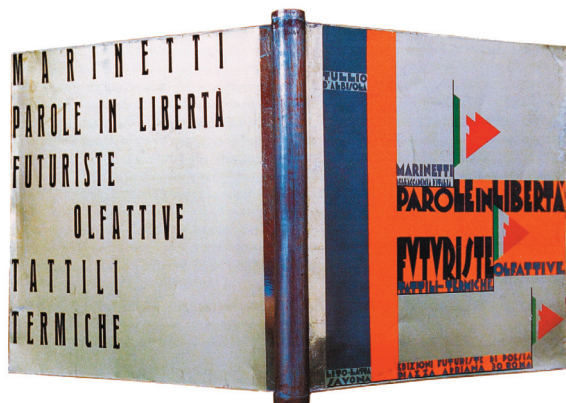


Innovative Materials and Formats

The Russian Constructivists and the Italian Futurist artists were especially innovative in working out new book structures and formats. Below is the cover and inside fold-out spread of *Depero Futurista* by Fortunato Depero, created and printed by the Italian Futurist in 1927.



An unusual metal hinged binding was created by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti for Tullio d'Albisola's *Parole in Libertá Futurista* in 1932, below.



The Russian Constructivists, were masters at using unusual materials. Many of the materials were of humble origin, like chipboard and cardboard as well as using inexpensive wallpaper, just as Burgess did 15 years before.



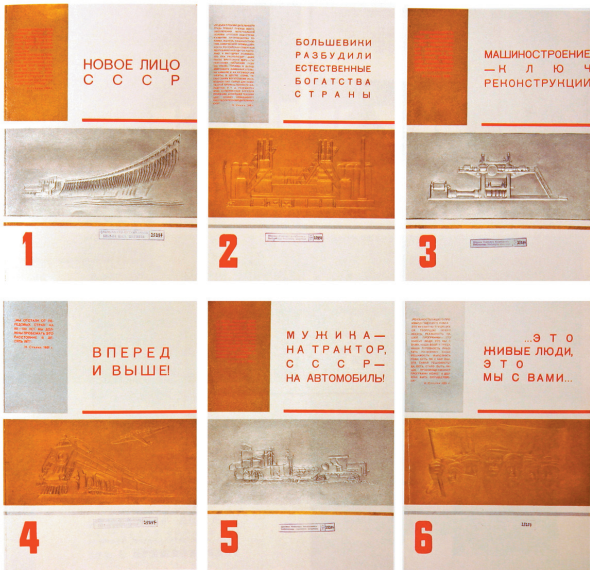
The books above were printed on wallpaper, giving them a rich, exotic texture and color palette. They also used an interesting, non-traditional shape, much like Burgess did. The ones on the left are by David and Vladimir Burliuik and Vasilii Kamenskii, published in 1914. The small books on the right are by Natalia Goncharova and David and Vladimir Burliuik, and were printed in 1913.

One of the great monuments of artists' books (and graphic design) is El Lissitzky's treatment of Mayakovsky's *For The Voice*. It stands as one of the most innovative and beautiful books ever created, both typographically and structurally, and has been hugely (and rightfully) influential:



In 2000, the MIT Press printed a facsimile version of *For The Voice*. It was not a very beautifully executed edition but was very useful in that MIT printed two versions within the slipcase, one that looked just like the original, in Russian. The companion version was printed in English using the roman alphabet, so for the first time many people understood the significance of the way the language and content was treated typographically. The edition quickly sold out.

By the late thirties some of the materials the Constructivists were using in their design were getting more



luxurious and upscale. El Lissitzky created a series of deluxe books on Soviet industry in 1935 that had elaborate blind-embossed metallic slipcases. Some might have thought that they were pretty over-the-top considering that they were created to celebrate the proletariat, but might be considered on a par with the Soviet tradition of having chandeliers in the subways.

The Russians Constructivists came out of many artistic disciplines, including painting and drawing, sculpture and photography, and all of these media informed their books and their design. Photography especially was used in new and eye-catching ways. There was extensive and imaginative use of fold-outs and gate-folds. Here are some images of the spectacular series of booklets that Varvara Stepanova and Aleksandr Rodchenko created called *USSR in Construction*. On the left we see some of the elaborate foldouts they used, and on the right is the amazing pop-out parachutist that was in the Soviet edition.



Photography

With the improvement in technology in photographic reproduction, using both letterpress and offset lithography, the first half of the 20th century saw many innovative uses by artists who used photography as their artistic medium and for collage. John Heartfield in Germany used these interests and skills to create exciting Dada book works like the one to the right here. Both of these were covers of Dada books from 1920, the one on the far right, *Dada Siegt!*, was a collaboration with another well-known German artist, George Grosz.



The Russian Constructivists were brilliant at using photography in fresh new ways that made their graphic design very modern-looking and exciting. They often used unusual perspectives, dramatic repetitive use of photographic elements, and the use of texture. These were often bled off the page on all four sides. On the right are two good examples, the middle image in by Aleksandr Rodchenko, the cover of the 1929 *Let's Produce*.



The bottom two images are by Varvara Stepanova, who was one of the finest Russian photographers. They show the dust jacket and end-sheets from the *Collected Poems, Vol. 1* by Nikolai Asseev, 1931. She collaborated with many of the other Constructivists, not always getting the credit she deserved.



Conclusion

As Clif Meador concluded in his *Small Pond* lecture, "...While the discourse of high art practice largely ignores the book arts and artists books, graphic design has been heavily influenced by these things: firstly, as the work of avant-garde artists moved from the high-art world into the world of public communication, these ideas and practices became part of the emerging discipline of graphic design, even helped to create graphic design.

Secondly, as books must compete with other media, book designers begin to adopt the intermedia strategies of artists books and book arts. This movement to make books that are more aware of the possibilities of the form of the book is doubly fueled by the trained designers who make them and by market pressures to make books more attractive as consumer objects. We have seen that designer's education is rich with exposure to the book arts and artists books and it seems inevitable that they will draw on that knowledge to inform their work as designers."

References:

1. Ulises Carrión, *The New Art of Making Books*; essay in *Artists' Book, A Critical Anthology and Source Book*; edited by Joan Lyons; Peregrine Smith Books in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985; Layton UT and Rochester, NY. See: <http://www.artpool.hu/bookwork/Carrion.html>
2. Clifton Meador, *The Small Pond*; lecture in February 2005 at the College Art Association conference, Atlanta GA, USA
3. Johanna Drucker; *The Century of Artists' Books*, Granary Books; New York NY, 1994 and reprinted 2004.
4. Ellen Lupton; essay in *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age, Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*; Williams College Museum of Art and Yale University Press; 1998.