



Parenthesis 15

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Designing the Mentoring Stamp: Kat Ran Essays in Philatelics

REVIEWED BY BARRY MOSER

Lance Hidy. *Designing the Mentoring Stamp: Kat Ran Essays in Philatelics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Kat Ran Press. 2007. 64 pp. US \$45 postpaid. Deluxe edition US \$155 postpaid.

Let me just say this at the outset and get it off my chest: in my opinion, every graphic designer, be he or she young or old, experienced or novice, traditional or experimental; every illustrator, professional or student; and every typographer, regardless of training, allegiances, personal tastes, preferences, or inclinations, needs to read this little book. Seriously. No excuses.

When it arrived in my mailbox at Smith College, I began reading it on the elevator as I made my way to my office with my satchel and the rest of the morning's mail. I read it as I fumbled with the keys to my office. I kept on reading it as I took off my jacket and hung it up with my spare hand. I read it as I made a pot of tea, again with one hand. I continued reading it as I walked down the hall from my office to the typography studio drinking said tea. I was so engrossed in it that I delayed the start of class for a few minutes so that I could wind down to a non-frustrating stopping point. "I am not going to be able to put this thing down," I thought to myself as I anticipated that stopping point, and indeed I had to make myself stop. But not before reading some of Mr. Hidy's guidelines on design—and the implied ethics of design—to my students: about *universality* (make it accessible to the widest audience), *minimalism* (use only essential elements), *hierarchy* (attract the eye to elements in order of importance), *redundancy* (deliver the message with text and image), *readability* (organize the elements so they can be distinguished and understood), about *honor* (esteem the work), *accuracy* (do whatever research is required), *originality* (which I think



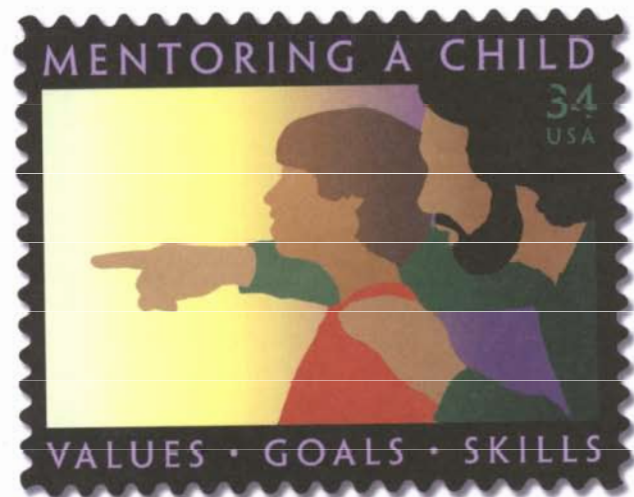
Lance Hidy's ink tracing over a lightened, ink-jet printed photograph.

goes a little deeper than his simple admonition not to plagiarize, but we have neither room nor interest here for my own discourse on the subject). Good advice. A solid outline for an undergraduate class in graphic design.

In the first eight chapters we are taken on a brief tour through the process of designing a postage stamp for the United States Postal Service: Hidy's Mentoring stamp, which was issued in 2002. He begins the tour with a bit of personal background and the impact that Leonard Baskin's 1967 Thoreau stamp had on him. He then outlines the assignment as it was given to him by the Postal Service, which I found particularly fascinating since I am not a philatelist, nor do I know much about the manufacture of postage stamps. From there he explains his personal practices, procedures, and theories and how they apply to this particular design problem (this is the section from which I read to my students telling them that they really, *really* need to pay attention to what he's saying), to his understanding and practice of composition, his use and application of color, photography, and light and dark. He wraps up the tour with a short history and displays of Penumbra, the typeface he designed and used on the Mentoring stamp. The text closes with short, diverse chapters on various technical issues as well as the remarks he delivered at the day-of-issue ceremonies in Annapolis, Maryland on January 10, 2002.

Hidy's writing is clean, clear, economic, and well-balanced—much like his designs. It is informative without ever being pedantic. If I had a negative criticism, it would be that I would have liked more of the writing. Given so much dull writing on these subjects, it was a delight to encounter prose that flowed well and kept a bright level of interest.

Michael Russem's admirable design and typography are equally clean, clear, balanced, and economic. The book is copiously illustrated with preparatory sketches, photographs, diagrams, and finished work. I might also add that the illustrations (and text) are splendidly printed by the Stinchour Press in four signatures and bound in simple and elegant printed paper wrappers by Acme Bookbinding. All in all, a mighty fine production. And if I may go back to my opening statement, everybody who is (or is interested in the crafts of) a designer, illustrator, or typographer should own



The final design, produced using Adobe Photoshop.

this book. I am so impressed with it that I hope that I can adopt it for my class. If I can't, well, then I'll just *read* it to them.

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New Vintage Type: Classic Fonts for the Digital Age

REVIEWED BY CRISPIN ELSTED

Steven Heller and Gail Anderson. *New Vintage Type: Classic Fonts for the Digital Age*. New York, Watson-Guptill Publications, 2007. Cloth. 192 pp. us \$39.95/cs\$49.95

“Retro is the new modern,” says the advertising copy for *New Vintage Type*, and the book spends nearly all of its 192 pages showing a fascinating and entertaining stream of designs for playbills, movie posters, CD covers, posters, advertisements, jam and wine labels, menus, trade cards, book jackets, and much else, all using types and layouts which have in common a stylistic hook into a defined period of printing history. Many of the designs are beautiful, some ingenious, and of course others are dreadful—although probably no two people would agree on which was which. The illustrations’ tremendous variety and colour and their excellent reproduction are compelling, and the energy with which the pages lead to one another make it almost impossible to put the book down midway.

New Vintage Type is divided into five sections: the Victorian Age, the “woodtype era,” Art Deco style, the Modern movement, and the “Eccentric” movement. These are not my distinctions, but the terms used in the table of contents of the book and in the jacket blurb—not that anyone could reasonably be held to account for what blurbs say. For some time I was able to set aside the slight worry this caused me in favour of looking at the pictures, but eventually, inevitably, I wanted to see what the authors had to say about what I was looking at, and what I found was discouraging.

What is most distressing about popular culture is that it does not address individuals, but rather bombards the mass, the many-headed—defined and articulated by marketers not as people, but as “demographics.” By its nature most such culture is generalized and unfocussed, intended to reach as many as possible by avoiding specificity in favour of cliché, thought in favour of attitude, and beauty in favour of superficial charm—what the late Bernard Levin once memorably described as “pleasing the general by adulterating the caviar.” As an example, among the murky unstated premises of this book is that the advent of the PC (now the essential bearer of pop culture) has made everyone a typographer, and that the mere acquisition of a computer program with a hundred or more readily-manipulated fonts allows anyone to set up as a designer with type.

I should state clearly that the examples shown in *New Vintage Type* are created by accomplished designers who know what they are doing. As pieces for study by serious students of historical typography, graphic design, or social history they are excellent in

every way. What I am suggesting, however, is that the authors, and presumably the publishers, have determined that there is a market for a book which persuades general readers looking at it that they know much more about typography, aesthetics, social history, letterforms, and graphic design than they do, and that having looked through this book they will have gained a sound understanding of historical mannerisms—which the authors call “styles.” (I am not sure these are the same thing.) On the face of it one might argue that there is nothing much wrong with this premise: if people want to be cajoled, and choose to believe it, they are perfectly at liberty to do so. Nor is the fact that the book doesn’t succeed in achieving this putative aim particularly insidious: every attempt cannot succeed. What is dismaying about the whole project is the carelessness and puerility of the text and critical apparatus, which is often so slapdash as to appear cynical. I doubt very much, on the evidence, that the text was edited at all; if it was, a mighty good sausage-stuffer was lost when whoever it was took up the job.

It is tedious and dismaying to have to back up such an allegation, but here are four examples of copy-editing slips, chosen quite at random:

Designed to work as both as a newspaper advertisement and a protest banner, Alan Kitching says ... [p. 111]

Apart from the repetition of “as,” was Mr Kitching employed both as a newspaper advertisement and a protest banner?

Compositionally speaking, designers often pick through the time-worn menus of type for complimentary combinations ... [p. vii]

I’m not sure what is meant metaphorically by “timeworn menus of type,” but surely combinations are either contrasting or complementary.

Although the production of Deco types ceased in the early 1940s, the typefaces that signalled the opulent style of the Deco decade retains a certain luster today. [p. 115]

“... the typefaces ... retains ...”?

It is difficult not to viscerally feel this murderous typography screaming ... [p. 172]

Whatever one may feel about split infinitives, viscerally needs an “s”—and if the typography is “murderous,” why is it screaming? Surely that would be the perquisite of the victim.

There is also a slightly “gee whiz” quality about some of the commentary: “I wanted to suggest Roman inscriptions without using the predictable Trajan typeface,” *exclaims* Phil Baines.” [p. 44. Italics mine.]. Sometimes the gaffs combine mechanical errors with arguable judgements, as when a pastiche of a job printer’s 1950s-style showcard has the following note: “While this is a little more sophisticated [than actual job printers’ showcards] (note the “A” and “T” in Kat—they overlap like the originals would never do) it is pretty true to the original inspiration.” [p. 166] The cacophony of “like the originals would never do” might make one miss the point that the “sophistication” in the illustrated letterspacing referred to is questionable: the type is a condensed Gothic, and the tight fitting of the “A” and “T” in “KAT” makes the space between the “K” and the “A” look far too wide. Any decent typographer would