

Reply to Robin Kinross

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Priorities or phenomena

Robin Kinross says: 'From our very first perceptions we order and make priorities. Some marks we find better than others.'

In *Haagse letters*, however, I discerned phenomena, not priorities. Robin's wording changes physics into aesthetics. This change could conceal the 'secret' of my teaching: its scientific approach. I demand that my students write with flexing pens, not because they should like such writing, but because they have to understand the expanding stroke. For the same reason they learn to analyse the stroke and to apply its parameters to lettering and type design. This is the basis of my attempt to educate masters of design, rather than propagating aesthetic preferences that are 'always with us'.

On the dichotomy of carving and modelling

Technical preference fluctuates with the dominant cultural attitude. In the 1970s I received a checklist with all techniques of printmaking except woodcut, wood engraving, steel engraving, and copper-plate engraving. Such a gap is typical of a romantic attitude. Anyhow, craftsmanship reflects civilisation more directly than scholarship which is acquired so easily.

How handwriting and typography are the same

There is no urgent need to teach the difference between typography and handwriting: it is obvious. The dependence of typography on handwriting, however, seems to be improbable: we must teach it.

Handwriting seems to generate letters on the spot, whereas typography applies prefabricated letters by which Robin Kinross 'recognises the modularity of typography'. The distinction between handwriting and typography as different *modes* of producing text assumes a system, the *category* of producing text, with typography and handwriting for subsets. If it is reasonable to call this category *writing*, typography is writing, just like handwriting. If the distinct words 'writing' and 'handwriting' cannot carry different meanings, the category of writing needs a new label (matching the scope of the German word *Schrift*). Meanwhile, I say *writing*.

The real issue is less trivial than the appropriate label for the category of writing: modularity cannot distinguish typography because in theory – that is, potentially – handwriting is modular as well (modularity is not exclusive for typography). The first thing children learn is to rely on the modularity of handwriting.

The subsets handwriting and typography inherit modularity from the category of writing. Only in (now obsolete) practice modularity used to be more rigid in typography than in handwriting.

From a theoretical point of view practical restrictions are always provisional. In the past typography imitated the mental modules of handwriting in rigid punches and matrices; modern typographic modules could interpret the mental module with almost the same flexibility as handwriting.

How handwriting and typography differ

Type design severs writing from handwriting, but this does not mean that type exists by itself. Type has to be studied under an overlay imposing a structure of strokes upon the arbitrary shapes of the drawing. The designer does not necessarily follow the pattern of strokes; but he has always to refer to it. Handwriting is the 'referent' or gauge of type design. Like a road sign, the analysis of strokes tells you where you are; it does not tell you where to go. The discipline of handwriting ensures freedom of design. If type design relapses into 'revivals' it still refers to handwriting, by proxy.

I made several attempts to deliver the expected 'implacable reply' to Robin's final argument but my objections are not that serious. I even agree that there is a difference between typography and handwriting. This is why I distinguish typography, as writing with prefabricated letters, from handwriting, that makes the letters in the context.

Alone I do not see this as 'a fundamental difference':

Both modes, handwriting and typography, allow us to adapt the module of writing to the context, be it a mental module or a typeface. This has always been the purpose of ligatures. Today it is possible to adapt the characters of a typeface to the actual sequence of letters in a text. This is *how handwriting and typography are the same*.

Yes, handwriting supposes a human hand, and here you have the fundamental difference in the shape of a truism: this is *how handwriting and typography differ*.