

# The McKibbin & Son Monograph Series

Christopher Buenaventura

In the late 1940s, George McKibbin invited several of the book industry's finest contemporary experts to write each part of a series of monographs. Established in 1890, McKibbin's book manufacturing company McKibbin & Son was located at the Bush Terminal in Brooklyn, New York, an industrial waterfront complex of railway systems, factories, and docks. His intent was to educate the interested reader about entry into the world of book design in a limited edition basis. A one-fold insert in the first volume, released in 1948 shows that almost 30 contributors were set to write for this series, and that McKibbin & Son would consider releasing the complete series of monographs in a single bound volume after the series completed. Neither of those seemed to be true. Internet searches reveal each volume's prefacing notes in descriptions about each of the individual books,

This is the [volume number] of a series of monographs devoted to the educational advancement of book design, manufacturing, and publishing, a project sponsored and published by George McKibbin & Son of Brooklyn, New York, complete book manufacturers since 1890,

or a paraphrased description, where the volume number never exceeds eight. The note in the eighth book, *The Little Details*, was no different from those of the others. It mentioned neither a ninth volume nor a compilation volume.

This seeming incompleteness does not detract from the series, however, since the eight authors offer interesting insights into the world of publishing in the late 1940s that can still apply today. As eight very different authors came together to briefly discuss overviews, nuances, and even experiences and preferences of the industry, it seems useful to likewise give an overview and a brief analysis of each volume. Since the series is specifically about book design, it would also be beneficial to examine how each individual volume exemplifies the guidelines and may serve as an example or non-example of the others. A discussion of each of the books will follow in chronological order.

1. *The Relationship between Type and Illustration in Books and Book Jackets*, A.P. Tedesco  
A.P. Tedesco, Art Director of the book publisher Grosset & Dunlap, opened the series by discussing illustrative material in published books. He mentions that many designers will avoid using illustrations and even ornaments and decorations so as to not interfere with the reader's imagination, but those who can employ illustrative material well can bring about a cohesive piece with such distinction that can tell a story even better than mere text alone.

Tedesco employs sideheads throughout the text, never stopping from or switching over to a different topic but notes a few key points throughout the monograph. The Art Director can select an artist that can fit the text well, or can send a manuscript to the artist and select a type to fit the illustrations he receives back from the artist. An example of this is shown in *Sun Up* by Will James, where Janson as a robust type fits well with the artist's heavy pen-and-ink drawings, and within the monograph series, *Some Trifles* and *Modern Scientific Book* show best the mix and careful planning of both photography and illustration with the proper weight amongst the texts. Layouts can be made more interesting if illustrations are distributed evenly throughout the text and are not overdone, and a great example Tedesco gives is the dictionary, but the problems posed involves using a different artists to work on a different subjects while keeping just enough illustrative detail to fit with the text. Within the monograph series, *Rendezvous* and *Form and Format* employ photographs on nearly every page, but this would be less considered overdone since these monographs adhere to the purposes of educating.

He recommends using well-designed type on modern book jackets to fit the subject of the book, rather than spending generally more on lettering that would be of mediocre quality or leave a mediocre effect, especially in a time when the jacket is rising as a piece of advertising material. He discusses basic lessons in color, but emphasizes the need to select a type that not only fits but *sets* the mood and style of the illustrations throughout a book. The other series books seem to have been published without jackets, which is a misfortune due not only to the possibilities of analysis but for the books' benefits.

Tedesco finally discusses binding dies, which likewise should be set in type rather than hand-lettered for the benefit of cost, size, quality, and even timelessness. Again, unfortunately, since all of the other books in the series are 32 or less pages, none of them reap the benefit of a brilliantly perfected binding die.

2. *Some Trifles Which Make for Perfection: A Brief Discourse on the Details of the Setting-up of Footnotes, Bibliographies, and Indexes*, Carl Purington Rollins

Rollins considers the fact that a book designer must always keep in mind the fact that a book is to be used, and the general effect of the appearance, size, bulk, and color are important to that fact. Even more important are the figure accessories to be found in the book, which give for the book's title: the footnotes, tables, indexes, extracts, and appendices that would go so far as to make that book perfect for use. He briefly discusses the printer's uses of those figure accessories to make the book handsome and to prevent the book from becoming ambiguous.

He opts not to side in a debate between whether or not to use footnotes, but gives general guidelines for how to properly design them when the decision is made to use them, some of them obvious. For example, footnotes should be leaded 1 point if the

text is leaded by 2, and footnotes should use a size of type that is 2 points less than the body text. Some interesting guidelines include using attractive marks instead of numbers when the references are few, and to experiment using dual-column footnotes if the measure of the text is long. Unfortunately, none in the monograph series utilized footnotes.

It is strongly emphasized in bibliographies to remain as compact as possible, and preferred to use a narrow measure for the easiest reference to the reader. Small caps should be used for titles and a hanging indent should be used for all sources. *The Little Details* uses a bibliography that meets exactly to these few guidelines, and *Form and Format* uses an even more compact take on the bibliography, using single-line citations and leaded as normally as body text. Rollins states that if the publisher prefers that the cited source should include the actual book's title page, this can be achieved with a zinc photoline block effect to show it as an illustration in the bibliography.

Rollins considers indexes to be amongst the most important tools in a lengthy book but urges a few additional guidelines, including using at least 9 point type, with 1 point or less leading, never to violate the hanging indent rule, and to never use bold faces or attempt to display anything other than alphabetical sections. He does not go on to show any illustration examples, and there are no indexes in any of the monograph volumes since they are all brief, but these guidelines seem fairly straightforward.

The readers of *Some Trifles* received a letter insert with the book, released in 1949 as with the six following volumes. The letter, written in a monospaced typeface from McKibbin & Son, encouraged readers to criticize more, even in addition to those already received for the first book in order to better progress the series. The book closes in a way that may have left readers may have done just that—Rollins's hesitance to agree with the "type should be invisible" mantra, and his belief that "the effort which goes into the construction of the page should be entirely subordinated to the effect of the page as a whole" (14). To each his own; the book itself is still helpful.

### 3. *A Rendezvous with the Book*, Merle Armitage

Armitage's contribution to the series was less a matter of guidelines to publishing and more a matter of his views on the state of the book in the time of the late 1940s. Laden with cover and inside matter of several books, a few his own, he uses examples to demonstrate many of his stream-of-consciousness thoughts, which he comes to prefer after a time of romanticism. He discusses how the men of every trade have a rendezvous with the book, meeting at a place where information can become permanently articulated, but arrives at an irony in that the book is losing its hold on humanity's brightest.

Armitage desired to print, regardless of his possible failures, to speak in the language of design and close the gap between the word and its presentation. He mentions a set of rules he abides by to avoid disaster, but does not delve into much detail for any single one except the first: creating the book as “an outward expression of its content” (15), which many understandably fail to achieve. He considers a misleading notion in that the “attitude that printing must serve *only* the function of readability, is parallel to stating that the only function of clothing is to cover nakedness” (22), stating that his ultimate goal in design is one that should be shared by all designers: to create a page so that a reader knows the subject of the text before reading it. Quite ambitious, he resolves that what makes a page reflect what it is before reading it—the year 1949—and why it is so difficult is due to his consideration of the time as transitional, in addition to it being the present time being defined.

There are no specific guidelines that any of the volumes of the monograph series were able to follow in relation to *Rendezvous*, but in a series as carefully examined as this one, it is reasonable to believe that these monographs are reflective of their content, books about books.

#### 4. *Planning, Design, and Production of the Modern Scientific Book*, Paul Perles

Perles emphasizes a strong blueprint stage to avoid later issues, especially considering a text issue where scientific authors often send manuscripts with far too many subdivisions and subheadings to the designer. Illustrations also worry since the scientific author must budget properly, so heavy consideration must be chosen between photographs (most easily obtained), illustrations (can easily show desired levels of detail but few familiar with the scientific field), and charts. Scientific books will often use a combination, but consideration of the tone values is required especially in texts where different media are next to each other. In the monographs that have illustrative material, it is clear that these have been examined, and this book alone has even employed the combination as an example.

It is often rare but extremely advantageous for the designer to be familiar with the background of the subject matter. In whatever case, designers of scientific books readily know the reader conditions, which are crucial to book design. Reading is often done by artificial light, usually after exaggerated mental and visual activity. Thus page design must be easy-to-read: low-finish stock, narrow measure, with old-style or transitional serifed faces, and often done in monotype composition due to the degree of scientific intricacy in characters. Headings and covers have been in heavy debate due to the seriousness of the subject matter, but it has often limited designers' imaginations. In considering these monographs as works of science, half fit the criteria, as four are done on coated paper, but the volumes have had strong headings and covers. Illustrations should be arranged so that their mentions are on the same or facing pages, and Perles suggests that when there are several works mentioned in

a short span, to put all on a single plate: *Rendezvous* and *Form and Format* employ this best but *Relationships* unfortunately fails to do so.

The more advanced the text the more advanced the typesetter must be, but the less supervision he will need. However, an engraver and printer must always have strong supervision since the pressroom is where the game can be won or lost.

##### 5. *Legibility: A Typographic Book of Etiquette*, Ernst Reichl

Reichl discusses legibility and typographic etiquette in his involvement with the series, stating even non-scientific claims in favor of practicality. He explains that legibility arises from what people know best, increasing if the conditions are the same as they previously were, and decreasing if anything that can be considered distractions is present. Legibility will often change with time, and Reichl discusses contemporary virtues which contribute to the legibility of the modern book.

A book which is to be read for long hours—not a magazine or newspaper which has bursts of text and illustration distractions—should be set at a readable 10 point face or larger. The type's leading should not be so little that it becomes difficult to find the next line; saving space to cut down on printing costs is not worth repeating the reading of a line. On the other hand it should not be so great that the space becomes its own visible unit, fatiguing the eye. In either case there is no tell-all formula, since each type needs its own special treatment (modern typefaces' thin serifs require more leading than old-style's gradual serifs). Running heads should naturally be set in the same face as the body text but in a different, bolder style, but if unnecessary, the text will often look better without them. The measure of the page also needs to be carefully selected, since a measure greater than twice the length of a face's lower case alphabet will cause the eye to have difficulty in finding the next line; a shorter one can cause rivers and disturb rhythm, and in some cases an author will letterspace which is arguably worse than adjusting the wordspacing. Every monograph in the series has been good about all of these guidelines, with Armitage choosing a larger type to fit the measure and Chaplin selecting spacier margins.

The designer must also carefully select the type page and those margins, working from designing the page and selecting the paper afterwards, and not the other way around. The margins should be chosen properly, which is fairly easy to select due to our eyes accepting many different sizes, in order to both warn the eye of the end of the line, as well as to set up space to hold the physical book without covering words. However they must not be too large so as to warrant belief as a mistake in printing and an unevenness of space relationships. Margin proportions often chosen 2 for the center, 3 for the head, 4 for the outside, and 5 for the foot, and adjustments should always be made in the head before the foot. *The Little Details* seems to best exemplify that given proportion, but the margins in *Relationships* are quite tight.

The paper selected should allow for the type to appear robust. Modern faces need smooth paper to display the serifs (shown in *Rendezvous*) while old-style faces require old-style paper; transitional is able to use either. Bulking paper, used to make a book seem bigger, is generally not recommended any time, since ink spreads, the text is blurred, and the plates require frequent cleaning which results in unevenness. If necessary, bulking paper should utilize a sans serif face to avoid the serifs blurring at all. The book closes with some hope in the future of a more scientific way to measure absolute legibility, which will be “shocking to the eyes,” and describes his style of writing the book in an upwards slanting face a wave for the future, which can hopefully be the right direction within the coming years. Unfortunately, it has still not yet caught on.

#### 6. *Lettering as a Book Art*, Oscar Ogg

Oscar Ogg describes the benefits of hand-lettering, in heavy contrast to A.P. Tedesco’s economical preference to type in *Relationships*, since it can best serve with type, creating a better cohesive units throughout a published book. Ogg describes the difference between lettering and calligraphy as the difference between a drawing and writing. Within a book, both are submissive to type, which had emerged within the recent hundreds of years, introducing rules new to print, just as writing once did in the thousands of years as it first emerged.

Lettering that occurs on a wrapper will be one of two forms: “picture” or photograph jackets, and designed jackets where lettering is a much larger focus. It should be clear which is desired to be accomplished in order to compete in the same split second as other materials at the point of purchase or on a coffee table. Great examples, just as those included in *Relationships* and *Rendezvous*, happen to be those that highly relate the book’s atmosphere to the jacket or box design to form a single cohesive unit. *Lettering* does give advice for those choosing it on binding dies, opposing the view of *Relationships* that type should always be chosen before it. It seems, however, to only support *Relationships*: copy has to be nearly perfect to show up well and to prevent going out of style within the coming generations, but retorts with the fact that if properly used, can be more beneficial than type, making it worth the cost.

As with the other texts such as *Modern Scientific Book*, *Lettering* recommends a solid background of the manuscript text in order to treat specialized design problems while consciously taking heed of the budget in order to create the most efficient book copy as possible. Ogg deeply discusses the drawbacks to the reproduction of calligraphy since any “better” solution inherently results in a skyrocketing of costs, and in any case does not do justice to the natural letter conformations and true line quality of original calligraphy. Initials, titles, and heads can benefit from lettering to create reader interest especially in informal texts, such as in those in *Some Trifles*, and Ogg emphasizes the sparing use of it to prevent over-ornamentation.

7. *Form and Format : Abstract Design and Its Relation to Book Format*, John Begg

Employing sideheads like in *Relationships*, Begg does not often stop to change topics but brings up a multitude of what he considers more important topics in the margins of a longer manuscript. He describes form as “an order established between various elements. In the book it is the relation of type to margins, illustrations to text, means to meaning and materials to method of production” (2). Begg, like Armitage and Reichl, emphasizes that form does not consider formulae that can produce solutions to any problem but that experiments have taken place only to encourage newer thought about typographic principles.

For much of the book he describes cubism and other movements relevant to type, relating typographic design as the structure and organization of abstract shapes on the plane that is the page. He analyzes two conflicting words, used in signs located at different places; one of “QUIET” represented as an idea instead of a sensation, and “RESERVED” without an expected politeness. He describes these outcomes as a result of a disparity between design and meaning, as demonstrated in several books. He discusses the expressions of the horizontal versus the vertical in proper applications, which is more relevant than classifying books as modern or traditional. He also discusses the expressions of space versus movement versus time. How a path is created in layouts, how relationships within a book are felt rather than recognized and how a book needs to be considered as a three-dimensional object with all parts to be related are all important in the understanding of the book. He stresses keeping an open mind about book experimentation in order to innovate in the industry.

Like *Rendezvous*, *Form and Format* does not contain any set guidelines but is a collection of general beliefs in book design. In this case, especially in the latter point, it seems reasonable to believe that McKibbin & Son is bringing about a full relationship between authors to introduce the novice to book publishing, in order to generate interest and innovation in book design rather than to stagnate it.

8. *The Little Details*, Ruth Chaplin

Ruth Chaplin explains the general purpose of McKibbin’s motives to educate the reader: describing what cannot be learned in a lecture but a best attempt to explain her own personal and practical experiences, how necessary they are to the enhancement of the beginner’s book design education, and how it can affect “more people with more knowledge of more phases of the book production industry” (10). She compares and contrasts the production manager to the fritter-maker, as the latter will often have all the necessary ingredients at hand after having an open store to choose from so much. The former does not necessarily have those luxuries due to cost, but can earn what is necessary for the good of his own design.

The book designer will learn quickly how difficult, costly, and time-intensive it is to bring together every part of the process, never done under one single roof.

Chaplin's epiphany occurred at the sight of Caxton and de Vinne portraits: the frustrations of the novice have often built into the greatest type designers in history and bring a kinship between every designer in the field. She notes that a novice enters the second stage of education as soon as he moves from general typographic practice to understanding what exactly those type designers were doing and thinking when printing and creating faces. At this point the composing room becomes a library of information, the case of type becomes an encyclopedia of the typeface's history, and the nature of the work begins needing information about the time period.

Ruth Chaplin describes typography as a medium of communication, and describes bad typography as the failure to be just that. Great designers will contort work in such intriguing ways but always end up communicating in a way that refuses to be lifeless or dull: proper, so as to have kept the "little details" for the preservation of fine printing, the great heritage, and further exploration.

In concluding this book, this series, and this paper, the grand theme as a book designer is to have a solid background in the subject matter before designing and to ensure that the entire piece is one cohesive unit of work. If there was any failure in the monograph series, it is revealed at the end of the eighth book that two thousand copies were printed, and it failed to communicate to a larger audience. But it is reassuring to know since there are so many that cherish great typography, and since it has lived to this age, "the little details' will be perfectly safe" (10).