



The Death of Design

An acquaintance, a book designer, fears that the laser printer will bury text design. "We're thrusting powerful new tools into the hands of unsuspecting and unprepared users," he observed. "Unable to understand design subtleties — kerning, fontwidths, negative space — they'll use their new machines recklessly, but not well. A flood of cunningly printed but aesthetically mediocre documents will crowd out more elegant works. Books are doomed. Design is doomed. Amateurs armed with laser printers — the electronic rabble — will drive professional designers into unemployment, and with them, quality design into oblivion."

By Paul Saffo

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I remain an unpersuaded optimist. I want to believe that desktop publishing will usher in a new age of design awareness. Traditional designers will not be displaced. They will become famous. Media celebrities. Folk heroes, like rock stars. No publisher will dare print a book without a prominently displayed colophon for the benefit of sophisticated and discriminating readers.

This popularization of design has already begun. In less than two years, one area — font design — has moved from obscurity to become the latest computer fantasy career. In the late 1970's, everyone wanted to write software. In the early 1980's amateur wordsmiths snapped up PCs to crank out the great American novel. Now everyone is trying to create fonts. The rest of design can't be far behind.

Yet the designer's fear is not without foundation. The history of print is littered with the corpses of knowledge professionals shoved aside by upstarts wielding new technologies. Scribes. Scriveners. Monks. Illuminators. Advances often have come at real cost to the earlier order. Whole industries have evaporated with breathtaking speed.

It was difficult for medieval scribes to take print seriously. Like the earliest laser printer manufacturers, Gutenberg and virtually all printers for a generation after aimed their product squarely at the high-end market. A goldsmith by training, Gutenberg was a perfectionist. His Bible was the equal of the best the monk *illuminati* could produce by hand, but print volumes were miniscule and the competitive effect imperceptible.

Others, however, applied Gutenberg's technology to the production of works of lower quality — and lower cost. In black ink only, this sort of printing was dismissed by the *illuminati* as a design disaster — vulgar monochrome impressions in an imperfect medium.

It was open to question whether print would succeed at all. Innovation was hardly fashionable in the fifteenth century. The occasional entrepreneur who turned up could count the chance of being burned for heresy among the many risks of doing business. Monks and their lay counterparts, the scribe copyists, had reason to be complacent.

Innovation prevailed. Quality printing made an end run around manuscripts. While scribes continued to serve the wealthy few, increasingly inexpensive and portable books opened entirely new markets. They made knowledge accessible. I can imagine the printer Aldus Manutius, pioneer of these new books, persuading reluctant Venetian investors with visions of publishing “for the rest of us.”

And sometime after 1500, that is precisely what printing became. In the dark ages if you wanted to read something, you went to a monastery. Even then, content was limited to religious subjects — medieval mass media. Now, quite literally, books both secular and religious could be read and purchased in the marketplace.

The Aldine books, so-called after Aldus, took Europe by storm, but not without controversy. Conservative scholars lamented that cheap printed books of suspect origin were driving reliable manuscript texts from the market.

They were right. Sometime after 1500, book sales finally began to hurt the manuscript trade. Copyists objected strenuously. One group even sought an edict banning printing in Paris. They might as well have ordered the Seine to

reverse course. The edict was enacted, but it was never enforced.

Many copyists — mostly the inflexible and the incompetent — joined the unemployed. But the adaptable copyists embraced printing as a new wrinkle in an old profession. Some blended print with handwritten text to hold down labor costs. Others became book designers for printers seeking to give their new tomes the feel and elegance of manuscripts.

The copyist's fate thus is as much a clue to the contemporary designers' salvation, as it is a warning. The role of designers will not disappear, but it most certainly will change. Some will become educators, others advisors to businesses seeking to use their new tools for maximum visual impact. A few will cling to traditional roles on the high end. And some will become celebrities. Really.

And what of design? We are entering a period of expansion and experimentation. Users will try to match the accomplishments of professionals. Mostly, they won't succeed. But in trying, they will lift up the design standard expected of routine business documents.

We also will see radical flights of design fancy performed by enthusiastic, unskilled amateurs. Much will be mercifully forgotten, but enough will be sufficiently exciting to make us wish for more. In the end, things will settle down into a radically new pattern.

Design will be demystified. It will become everyone's business. All of our powerful new tools will make us — producer and reader, professional and amateur alike — much more aware of good design. And we won't even realize it is happening. We will be too busy creating fonts and puzzling out the mysteries of kerning to notice. □

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