

Jeremy Aynsley, *Graphic Design in Germany 1890-1945*. Thames & Hudson, 2000. 239 pp. 253 illustrations. ISBN 0-500-51007-5

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

The history of Germany from its unification by Bismark in 1871 to the end of World War II is usually divided by scholars into three periods—the Kaiserzeit or time of the kaisers, which lasted until the end of World War I; the Weimar Republic, born of the desire to forge a modern democracy from the ashes of the war; and finally Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, which sought to restore Germany to its past glory at the expense of all who did not fit the regime's narrow definition of an Aryan German.

Within each period, cultural activity differed significantly, although there were some overlapping strands that served as lines of continuity between *periods*. Thomas Mann, for example, a well-known novelist before World War I, continued to gain in reputation during the Weimar years, although his literary style was more traditional than that of many Weimar authors. Likewise, Hitler retained some of the strong manifestations of modernity that flourished in the Weimar Republic even though he vowed a return to more conservative cultural traditions that had been marginalized or rejected in the Weimar years.

The diverse forms of cultural practice in Germany from Bismark's time to the end of World War II have been relatively well documented, particularly in literature, art, architecture, film, theater, and music. However, with the exception of the vast and ever expanding literature on the Bauhaus, comparatively little has been written about German design, particularly in English. John Heskett's *Design in Germany: 1870-1918*, published in the mid 1980s, offered a well-researched account of industrial design and design policy during the Kaiserzeit, and several excellent studies of the German Werkbund exist, notably those by Joan Campbell and Frederick Schwartz. Few volumes were published about graphic design prior to the book under review. The first was a slim now-forgotten publication, Eckhard Neumann's *Functional Graphic Design in the 20's*, which appeared in 1967. Its author, more an aficionado than a scholar, gathered his information first-hand from many of the designers who were involved with the "new typography" and he provided numerous examples of their work. Subsequently, books on Jan Tschichold and Herbert Bayer, written respectively by Ruari McLean and Arthur Cohen, came out, and more recently Christopher Burke published a critical biography of typographer Paul Renner.

Given the powerful influence that German graphic design before the Nazi period has had on the field at large, it is surprising that so little has been written about it. Equally puzzling is the

fact that more research has not been done on graphic design during the Nazi years, particularly since it was skillfully used by the regime to forge a total visual identity that left no room for alternatives.

Jeremy Aynsley's new book, which spans the period from 1890 to the end of World War II, is therefore particularly welcome. It was produced as a catalogue to accompany an exhibition at the Wolfsonian-Florida International University entitled *Print, Power and Persuasion: Graphic Design in Germany 1890-1945*. The material in the exhibition and in the book was drawn exclusively from museum founder Micky Wolfson's vast assemblage of books, posters, and graphic ephemera and the catalogue therefore reflects both his insightful eclecticism and the limits of any one person's collecting instincts. The volume is handsomely illustrated with a large number of color reproductions. It also contains an extensive bibliography, which should serve as an eminently useful reference tool for future scholars.

Following the standard periodization of German history up to 1945, Aynsley organizes his narrative according to the three periods mentioned above, which he considers to be "contrasting stages of Modernity." He characterizes the period leading up to World War I as a time when a shift occurred from applied art to graphic design. Aynsley discusses the well-known type designs of Otto Eckmann and Peter Behrens, which he connects to a discussion of the broader context of graphic production during the period, particularly the practices of the type foundries, printers, and entrepreneurs such as Ernst Litfass, who designed a poster column that became ubiquitous on city streets throughout Germany. The author also offers a fascinating account of Karl Ernst Osthaus, a founder of the Werkbund, who established a huge collection of contemporary applied art and design and then published an influential series of monographs on German graphic artists beginning in 1911. Aynsley also foregrounds Hans Sachs, the Berlin poster collector who was a leading promoter of *Das Plakat*, the journal of commercial art that began publication in 1910. He mentions *Das Plakat* briefly but surprisingly does not give it sufficient attention even though it was so important in shaping the identity of a new commercial artist in Germany who was equally at home designing posters, cigarette packaging, or candy wrappers. Among the designers in Berlin who exemplified this new type was Lucian Bernhard, whom Aynsley discusses in detail, including his career as an emigré in the United States. The author contrasts Berlin, where Bernhard and other new commercial artists worked, with Leipzig, which, had a strong tradition of book design rather than commercial art, but he does not mention Munich, where Ludwig Hohlwein and others produced posters that rivaled the *sachplakate* or fact posters of Berlin. Hohlwein receives little attention in the book although he is a major figure whose career spans all three periods of German modernity. One of

the country's leading poster artists before World War I, he was inspired by the matter-of-fact posters of the Beggarstaff Brothers in England rather than by the German Jugendstil. In the 1920s, he defined a look for the German smart set and during the Nazi years, he produced propaganda posters with flattering portrayals of handsome young Aryans.

One of the lesser-known, yet significant, graphic designers to whom Aynsley devotes considerable attention is Fritz Hellmut Ehmcke. Like his important counterpart Wilhelm Deffke, whom Aynsley does not mention, Ehmcke was a major figure who is still virtually unknown outside a small coterie of experts. He never forged a signature style as many other designers did, yet he was active as a board designer, creating typefaces as well as printed pieces, while also serving as a teacher in Munich and a graphic advisor to the Cologne *Pressa* exhibition in 1928. In 1900 Ehmcke and some friends formed the Steglitz Werkstatt in Berlin to produce graphic art together just as their Jugendstil colleagues *shortly* before them had established workshops to make furniture in Munich and Dresden. Ehmcke was not among those designers like Jan Tschichold who were branded as Cultural Bolsheviks when the Nazis came to power and, under Hitler, he found a sympathetic context in which to express his nationalistic preference for traditional German script.

In the section on Weimar modernism, Aynsley devotes considerable discussion to the Bauhaus, as all books on Weimar culture do. He contrasts it, however, with an extensive account of the Reimann Schule in Berlin, which, unlike the Bauhaus, prepared students for specialized careers in shop-window display, costume design, poster making, fashion presentation, and illustration. According to Aynsley, the Reimann school was highly influential in training employees for German manufacturing and retail enterprises. It enrolled nearly 1,000 students a year compared to one fifth that number at the Bauhaus. Aynsley gives an excellent account of the school's Commercial Graphics class, run by Max Hertwig, a graphic designer previously unknown to me.

In his discussion of the Bauhaus graphics curriculum, Aynsley, like many scholars, focuses primarily on the course of Herbert Bayer, which only lasted (only DELETE) from 1926 to 1928 when Bayer left the school. In this brief section, in fact, Aynsley writes mainly about Bayer's views on typography rather than about particular exercises he devised for the students. For this writer, the graphic design course created by Joost Schmidt after Bayer left is much more important as a pedagogical activity. Schmidt invented a series of projects that developed the student's knowledge of layout and typography and his course served as a training ground for a number of successful graphic designers such as Ringl + Pit..

It would have been impossible to ignore Jan Tschichold, the man behind the “new typography” and the author of the 1928 book by the same name. Aynsley provides an account of Tschichold’s work but in discussing it he does not give sufficient weight to *Typographische Mitteilungen*, the printing journal that published Tschichold’s first manifesto, *elementare typographie* (Elementary Typography) in 1925 and then accommodated the fierce debates on the new typography that followed the dissemination of Tschichold’s views.

A particular strength of the Weimar part of Aynsley’s book is the extensive discussion of *Gebrauchsgraphik*, the illustrated magazine of advertising art that first appeared in 1927. This important publication, which continued long after the Nazis came to power, is one of the major resources we have for understanding the discourse on advertising art and its future in Germany. Attention has focused consistently and almost exclusively on Jan Tschichold and others like Max Burchartz, Willi Baumeister, and Cesar Domela who espoused the new typography. By contrast, Aynsley’s writing on *Gebrauchsgraphik*, broadens our knowledge of Weimar graphic design considerably and points towards a more inclusive account of it than we have had until now.

In the final section of the book, which treats graphic design during the Nazi regime, Aynsley builds on the argument made by John Heskett more than twenty years ago in his article, “Modernism and Archaism in Design in the Third Reich” that graphic production under Hitler was a mix of traditional and modern elements. Providing a valuable complement to Heskett’s focus on industrial design, Aynsley gives a fascinating account of the typographic debates early in the Reich that subjected the “new typography” to an intense critique and led to the promotion of new black letter fonts such as Tannenbergr. In previous accounts of Nazi graphics, the emphasis was on propaganda, particularly posters and insignia, and no attention was devoted either to policies that affected the working designer or to examples of commercial design work.

Among the examples of modernism in the Third Reich are Herbert Bayer’s covers and layouts for the fashion magazine, *die neue linie* (The New Line), which Bayer began to produce around 1930 and continued to work on at least until late 1936. When he left the Bauhaus in 1928, Bayer discovered Surrealism and his designs began to incorporate a range of cultural references and graphic techniques that were absent in his more limited Bauhaus phase. Bayer became an art director with the Dorland Agency in Berlin and *die neue linie* was one of his accounts. He also did pharmaceutical advertising and covers for other publications such as *Gebrauchsgraphik*.

Bayer's most controversial projects during the six years that he remained in Germany while the Nazis were in power were the large exhibitions and their catalogues that he designed for Berlin, the new capital of the Reich. These included *Deutsches Volk, Deutsche Arbeit* (1934), *Das Wunder des Lebens* (1935) and *Deutschland Ausstellung* (1936). In his account of the latter exhibition, Aynsley notes that it was "an important popular manifestation of national and, at times racist propaganda, in which central concepts of National Socialist ideology were used as organizing principles." (206) He then shows how this phase of Bayer's career was whitewashed after he emigrated to the United States in 1938, emphasizing in particular, Alexander Dörner's 1947 book on Bayer, *The Way Beyond Art*. By concluding with "The Case of Herbert Bayer," Aynsley demonstrates how cultural practices can overlap from one period to another. This is also evident in his account of Fritz Ehmcke, who plays a significant role in each of the three periods that are covered in the book.

Although it has some important omissions, this volume offers much new information and suggests many avenues for further research. It is also a valuable antidote to the more selective treatments of German graphic design that preceded it. Despite the fact that Germany, particularly during the Weimar years, was the driving engine of modernism in *European* typography and commercial design, we still know comparatively little about this subject. Besides the Bauhaus, there were important schools in Stuttgart, Essen, Halle, Frankfurt, Berlin, and other places where substantial work was going on. Likewise, the largest number of German graphic designers in the 1920s did not embrace the new typography and we need to know more about what they did. And lastly, the strategy by which Joseph Goebbels was able to create an all-encompassing identity program for the Nazis that ranged from uniforms and banners to stationery, typography, and posters has yet to be uncovered. Thus, it makes sense to consider *Graphic Design in Germany, 1890-1945* as an outstanding transitional volume. It remedies the previous overemphasis on Jugendstil and the Bauhaus, yet it has significant omissions. The full story of graphic design in Germany is yet to be told but Aynsley's book is an excellent beginning.

Copyright © 2001 Victor Margolin. All rights reserved.  
First published in *Journal of Design History*, vol. 14, no. 3.