

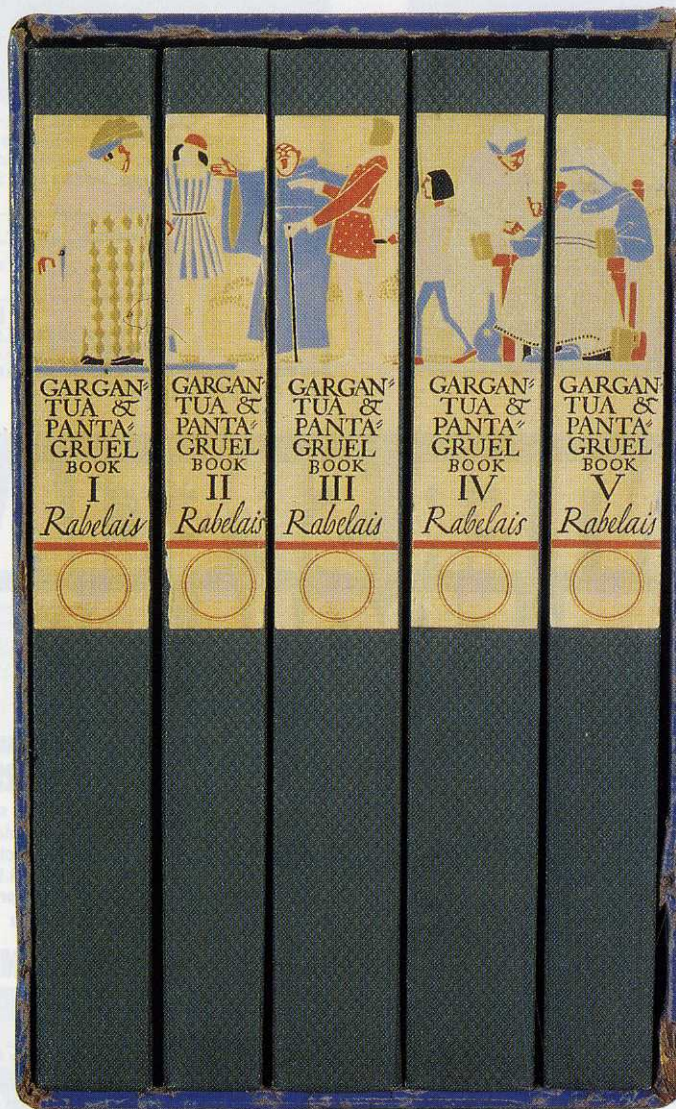
W.A. Dwiggins: Master of the Book

Discover some of the inventive ways this influential designer used to create book designs, illustrations and decorative ornaments for the book publishing industry.

By Steven Heller

A few years ago a design historian traced the first use of the term “graphic designer” to a single source, a short article in a 1922 edition of the *Boston Globe* written by W.A. Dwiggins, who used this new coinage to distinguish himself from others practicing in the graphic, printing, advertising and typographic arts. Coining this term is a watershed in the annals of visual communications because, unbeknownst to Dwiggins at the time, the term “graphic designer” marked a move away from the specialist to the generalist under one inclusive rubric. More important, it suggests a higher calling than does the now-unfashionable term, commercial artist.

Though William Addison Dwiggins (a.k.a. Bill, WAD, Dwig and Dr. Hermann Pütterschein), who was born in 1880 in Martinsville, Ohio and died in Hingham, Mass. in 1956, is well known among aficionados of fine printing and typography, he is a virtual missing link between the Arts and Crafts and Modern movements of advertising and book design. He stud-



ied lettering under Frederic Goudy at the Frank Holme School of Illustration in Chicago, then after a brief attempt to open a printing shop of his own in Ohio, he accepted Goudy's invitation to join him in Hingham, Mass., where Goudy's Village Press had recently been relocated. While Goudy eventually moved to New York, Dwiggins remained. Unlike his friends

and colleagues, including Bruce Rogers, D.B. Updike, and Goudy, each of whom brilliantly practiced one or two specialties, Dwiggins performed with renaissance diversity.

In an anniversary keepsake issued on the occasion of his 100th birthday, W.A. Dwiggins was called an “advertising pioneer and reformer; book, dust jacket and binding designer; calligrapher and cartographer; daring colorist and decorator of printed matter; designer of printing types; humorist and writer; illustrator of books and advertisements; marionette designer and maker; pamphleteer and reformer of the currency; scenic designer and builder; stencil cutter and private pressman; theater operator and playwright.” He was also the co-proprietor, with Dorothy Abbe, of the Pütterschein-Hingham press which issued occasional typographic treasures.

He did not just dabble in the above, but accomplished each with flair and aplomb—genius really—and left an unmistakable personal signature on everything he touched. Indeed, his graceful calligraphy and elegant lettering were paradigmatic additions to the language of American graphic art. Though based on venerable dec-

orative languages—particularly Mayan, Aztec and Chinese ornament—Dwiggins' stencilled and painted decorations were emblematic, not derivative of the Moderne style. Yet he would doubtless reject an affiliation with any stylistic movement, since as an unassuming maverick he simply preferred the idiosyncratic to the conventional for its own sake.

Faint, illegible text at the top of the page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side.



GARGAN-
TUA &
PANTA-
GRUEL
BOOK

I

Rabelais

GARGAN-
TUA &
PANTA-
GRUEL
BOOK

II

Rabelais

GARGAN-
TUA &
PANTA-
GRUEL
BOOK

III

Rabelais

GARGAN-
TUA &
PANTA-
GRUEL
BOOK

IV

Rabelais

GARGAN-
TUA &
PANTA-
GRUEL
BOOK

V

Rabelais



In his iconoclastic, yet highly praised book, "Layout in Advertising" (Harper and Brothers, first published in 1928 and reissued 20 years later), Dwiggin eschews trend or convention: "There is no established and standard practice that can be quoted to aid the student of layout—he will need to evolve his own method of design under the tutelage of his own convic-

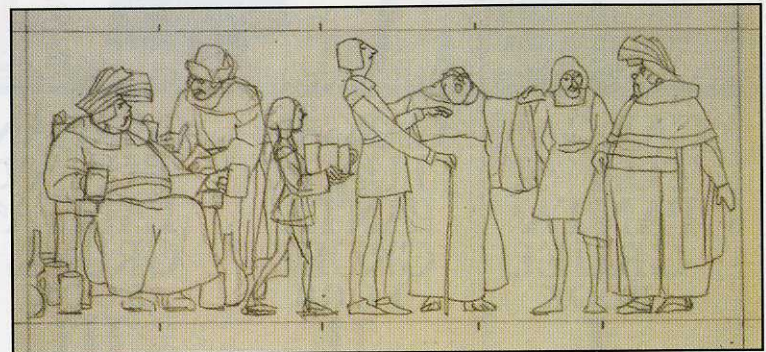
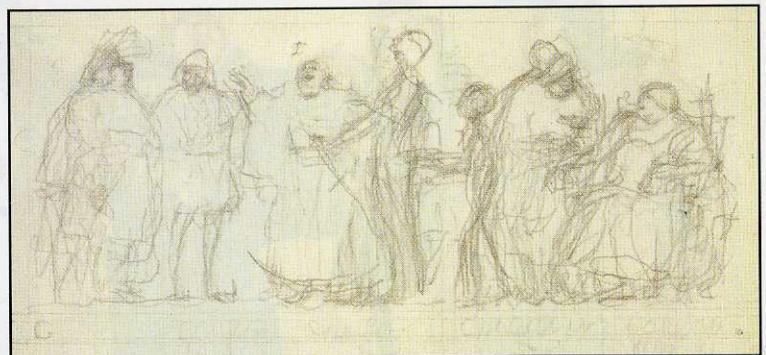
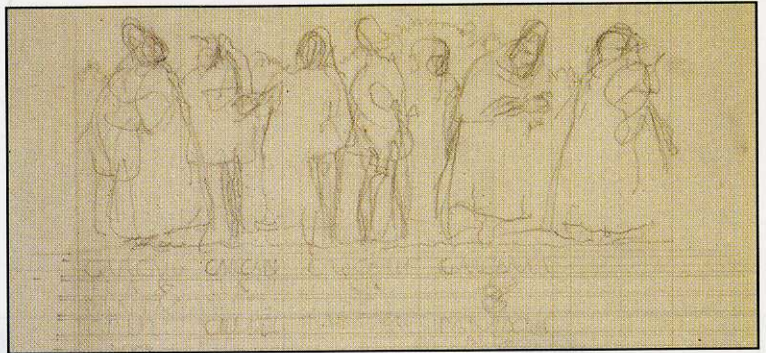
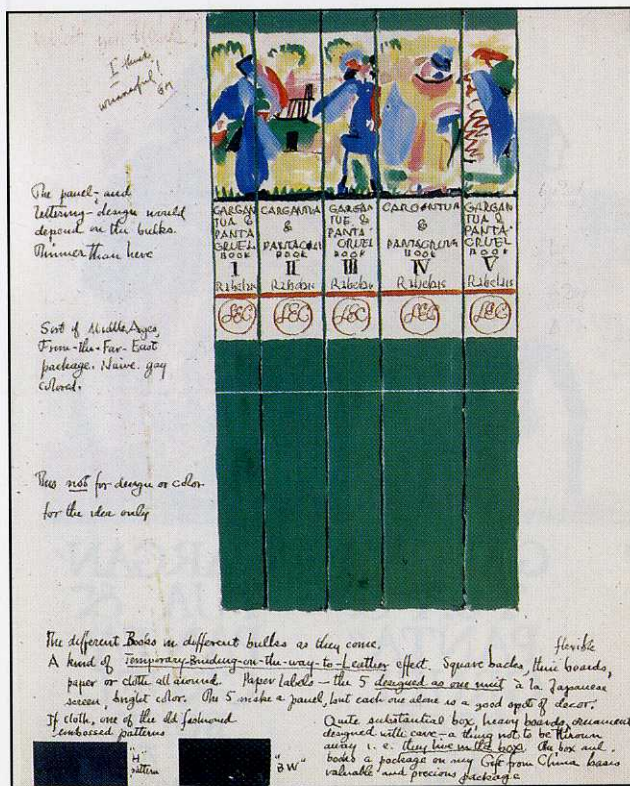
tions, his taste, and his experience."

INDIGENOUS INNOVATOR

Because of his impact on the quality of advertising art and his later devotion to raising the level of design and production of commercial books, it should go without saying that Dwiggin was among the most influential practitioners of his epoch.

Gargantua and Pantagruel The Limited Editions Club version of the five-volume set, "Gargantua and Pantagruel" (1936) is one of the most superlative efforts on Dwiggin's shelf. In this unusual solution to a multi-volume problem, Dwiggin tied the books together through one shelfback illustration divided in fifths. On the right is one of the original binding labels, on the left the label as it appears on the bound volumes.

Presentation Sketch In the watercolor sketch below, Dwiggins presents publisher George Macy with the basic idea for the five volume set. Dwiggins' notes indicate that he wants the spine illustration to be like a brightly colored Japanese screen. On the lower left corner he pasted cloth texture samples. In red pencil Dwiggins asks Macy what he thinks. Macy scribbles, "I think wunnerful." In Dwiggins' first rough sketch (at right, top), he gives an initial suggestion for position of the figures, working in reverse. In the second sketch (center), Dwiggins further defines the figures with a loose line, working in the correct view. In the final pencil drawing (this one is reversed), he has defined all the figures (below).



About the former accomplishment, Will Bradley duly noted that Dwiggins had brought taste and skill back into a field that in the early 1900s had "sunk to the lowest possible depths." This is especially important given the tendency in current design history to focus on Modern developments imported from Europe and the Soviet Union during the 1920s and '30s. Indigenous innovators like Dwiggins, who was very prodigious during the influx of foreign avant-gardisms, are often obscured or forgotten.

For many students of graphic design history, Dwiggins is an unknown presence whom one discovers almost by accident, despite the fact that he contributed five published typefaces for Mergenthaler

Linotype Company, including Electra, Caledonia, Eldorado, Falcon and Metroblack, as well as an assortment of stylish ornaments (or dingbats, as Goudy called them) known as Caravan decorations. And despite the fact that book design was markedly improved by this master—during an age when the dust jacket was routinely discarded before a book was placed on the shelf—he is often favored with only an historical footnote. Perhaps this is because he was a profound influence in areas that have become anachronistic.

BOOK ARTS Dwiggins' title pages and bindings, the latter an ostensibly lost commercial book art and the former virtually ignored in current design competitions, were beautiful and often quirky. No won-

der he was once referred to as "that incomparable playboy of typography." In Dwiggins' day all the graphic power and excitement that today is imbued in the dust jacket was etched into the spine (or shelfback), as though this narrow signpost was the most visible selling tool available to a publisher. Of course, even today it is difficult to ignore one of his exquisitely decorated spines on a shelf, which incidentally were all hand-drawn and lettered without the benefit of photostats.

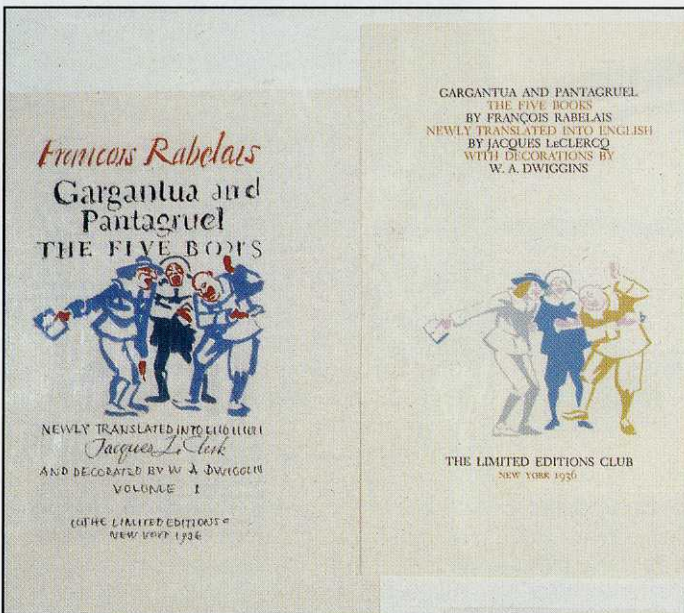
From Dwiggins' public and private writings (the latter to friends, colleagues and publishers—as well as insightful personal notations on the flyleaf of some of his books), a portrait of a passionate yet gentle man takes form. He could be witty or



Determining Palette Dwiggins experiments with a color palette in the watercolor sketch at left, which appears to have been painted with a transparent color and color mixed with white.

Title Pages For the title page of "Gargantua and Pantagruel: The Five Books," Dwiggins made two watercolor sketches (one of which is shown at left in both of the two illustrations below) to determine type composition and color scheme.

Lettering Master For the title pages of the first book in the series, Dwiggins also made numerous pen-and-ink sketches (two of which are shown here, left and right) and the finished version (center). A master of lettering, Dwiggins' titles were mostly hand drawn in ink.



poignant, sarcastic or serious, but one would be hard-pressed to find a hint of rancor or cynicism. He was generous to a fault about sharing his knowledge and techniques. His words reveal a man obsessed with art and craft while always anxious to push its boundaries. Dwiggins was devoted to art. Not the elitist kind but, as is evident in the three permanent memorial rooms in the Boston Public Library housing his books, work table, furniture, type drawings and marionettes, it was an art that brings pleasure to many people while providing aesthetic models for those who practice design.

ADVERTISING Despite his coinage of the term graphic design as an alternative to commercial art, Dwiggins never denigrated de-

signers for commerce, but rather attempted to expand their parameters by broadening the scope of design. In "Layout In Advertising," he wrote, "For the purposes of the argument 'advertising' means every conceivable *printed* means for selling anything." He also defines his approach to this mass communications form as a uniquely personal pursuit. "The compiler [of this book]," he confidently says in the introduction, "has been allowed to work out his own method of exposition. He has worked by impression and allusion rather than by precept and example. He shows no specimens of advertisements actually existing; he manufactures his own. He avoids technical matters—makes a *maedoine* of his metaphors when the case demands—

invokes the aid of slang."

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

Dwiggins' very unique personality came through in language and deed. In 1922, at age 42, he was diagnosed as having diabetes (then a fatal illness), causing him to ostensibly reject most advertising work, devoting himself instead to pursuits that would bring only personal happiness in the years remaining, regardless of the financial consequences. "I am a happy invalid, and it has revolutionized my whole attack," he wrote, unaware that he would be reprieved and live to his mid-70s. "My back is turned on the more banal kind of advertising. [I] have cancelled all commis-

(Continued on page 114)

Marco Polo This color breakdown for the portrait of Kublai Khan for "The Travels of Marco Polo," (1933) includes instructions to the printer for the black, red and yellow plates (left). Dwiggin's also provided a careful drawing for the entire plate rendered in black and red ink (right). The portrait is rendered in the same style as the decorative ornaments, which may have been first rendered with stencils.

Title Page Sketch, Book 1 As in the previous series, the color rough of the complete title spread is rendered in watercolor with the lettering drawn by hand. The design follows the sketches exactly (left below).

Printed Title Page The finished title page for Book I of the series shows an illustration of Marco Polo with the deliberate breaks in copy as per Dwiggin's precise specifications (at right below).



(Continued from page 111)

sions and . . . am resolutely set on starving . . . I will produce art on paper and wood after my own heart with no need to any market." Subsequently he designed in their entirety 280 books for Alfred Knopf Inc., at least half a dozen for the Limited Editions Club, and many more for other fine publishers. If he had a credo it was to fight boredom. "All typographic rules are off in the fight against that demon," he declared. If he had a mission it was to improve the standard of book design, which indeed he did.

In the following critical excerpts, Dwiggin debunks the canards of commercial art, while at the same time raising its stan-

dards. Though written more than 50 years ago, they address today's need to reject overly conspicuous graphic design in an age of raised environmental consciousness. On the subject of monotony in booklets (or what are now called brochures), he wrote: "[The] are like leaves of trees—numberless. It would be a relief if they emulated foliage in another respect and were of infinite variety. I suppose one booklet *does* differ from another in glory . . . but as they come to me they all might as well have been born in an incubator."

On house organs he wrote: "The pressure to be smart is too great. Boil the thing down to the quintessential reason for issuing a house organ, and let the residue solid-

ify in the simplest possible typographic form. The result will startle you (in the midst of a ruck of smart house organs) by its conspicuous individuality and air of solid conviction." About package design he says: "The source of ornamental detail on the outside of 'package goods' is a profound mystery; no human brain could give birth to these singular contortions."

And finally on trademarks or what Dwiggin calls in the vernacular of his day, firm signatures, he seems to echo current critiques concerning originality: "[Firm signatures are] cryptograms, usually; script containing a meaning artfully concealed. A certain type of firm signature can be traced back to some complacently

assured proprietor who wrote his name on a slant, with a flourish under, and said 'Aha!'—whereupon all neighboring proprietors within his field of influence wrote their names on a slant, with a flourish under, and said 'Aha!' ”

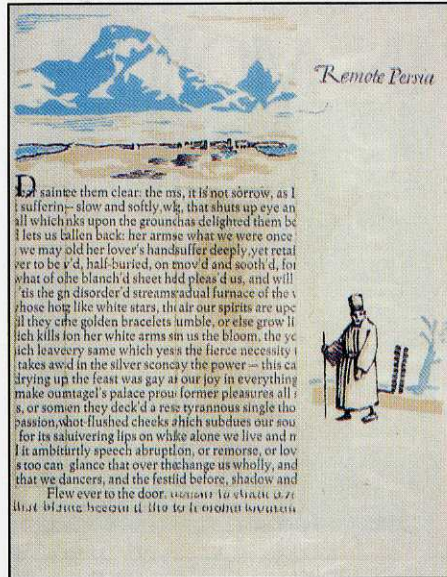
DESIGN PROCESS

For nearly 10 years Dorothy Abbe worked with and assisted Dwiggins in many endeavors, as well as serving as his art executor. She lives today in the two-story shingled building, each story with a ground level entrance, that Dwiggins designed as studio (above) and marionette theater (below). There she maintains a collection of precisely labeled files and record boxes containing roughs, sketches, finishes and notes on many aspects of Dwiggins' work. With her help I shall attempt to show something of the way he worked as exemplified in two projects, utilizing his various notes regarding each one.

Designer and illustrator Warren Chappel said of Dwiggins, "There are few American designers whose work can be revisited after decades with more pleasure and instruction." This is a statement borne out in the examples of the book designs discussed here. Through the shelfbacks and title pages for the boxed set of five volumes of François Rabelais' "Gargantua and Pantagruel" (1936) and the title pages and decorations for "The Travels of Marco Polo" (1933), Dwiggins' virtuosity is revealed, as is the passion for his craft.

Abbe recalls his intense concentration as he bent over the drawing table. "One stood quietly apart waiting for him to look up. Presently he swung from his stool. With a final glance at the piece that absorbed him, he reached for tobacco and, filling his pipe slowly turned toward you, smiling his welcome. This was ever his way—the smile, the slow, unhurried steps, emphasized by the simplicity of his dress, always in white. Not only did he move slowly, but he worked slowly in the sense that the first effort was usually discarded, to be written, or drawn, or carved, again and again. And yet in this quiet, patient manner he brought into being more than most people even dream of."

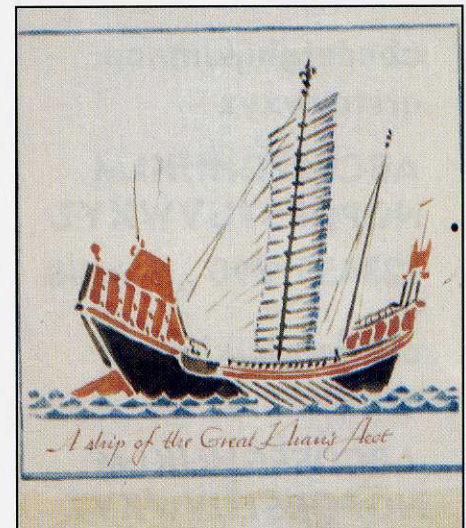
GARGANTUA AND PANTAGRUEL The Limited Editions Club version of the five-volume set, "Gargantua and Pantagruel," is one of the most superlative efforts on Dwiggins' shelf. Every aspect of book production and manufacture from the color of the cloth bindings and slipcase, and the con-



Page Design For "Marco Polo," Dwiggins also created sketches showing page design (with greeked type) and the kind of marginal illustrations he planned for the pages (left). As in his portrait sketches, these use simple line, shape and minimal color for maximum effect.

Illuminations This pencil sketch (below left, at top), pen rendering (with corrections made in white watercolor) and printed marginal illumination also appeared in "Marco Polo." Dwiggins' procedure was to make corrections on both sides of bond paper, then rub the reverse drawing onto another sheet, providing the correct version. He called these "thin paper rub-downs."

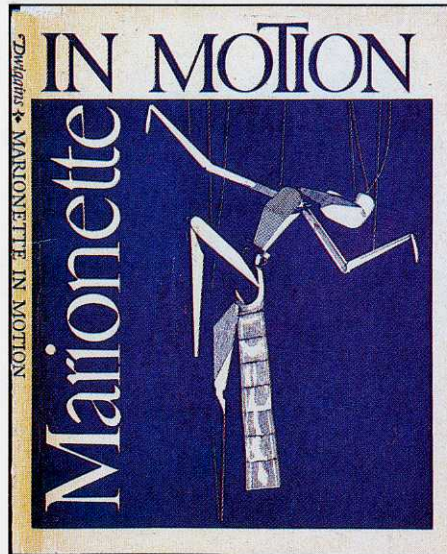
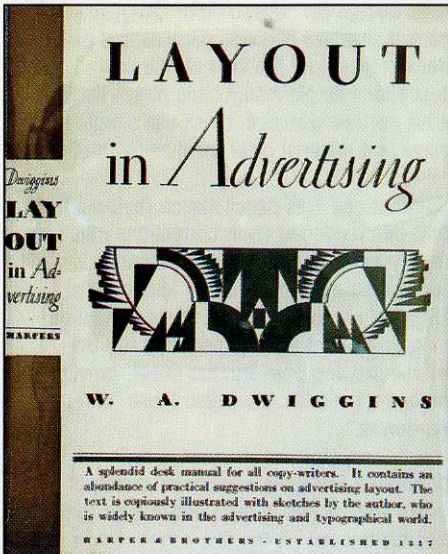
Illustration Dwiggins' watercolor sketch of Khan's ship relates in form and design to the ornaments used on the title pages (below right) no doubt a result of his stenciling technique.



ceptual acuity of the illustration to the construction of ornament and the lettering on the title and chapter breaks makes this among the most alluring, readable and witty fine press books ever printed. Dwiggins designed classics before and after, but none so exquisite yet accessible.

Although he was assigned the project by George Macy, the irascible—but not to Dwiggins—publisher of the Limited Editions Club, Dwiggins would never have accepted the commission if either subject or constraints were too limiting. It was Dwiggins who suggested dividing the text into five separate volumes as opposed to the three originally planned, to which Macy agreed. (Incidentally, "Gargantua and

Pantagruel" was written as five books under one cover.) Dwiggins made many sketches by way of accomplishing his goal of tying together the volumes with an illustration that would extend across all the spines. For the title pages of each of the five books, he made carefully lettered, actual size pen-and-ink layouts, at times rendering more than one version. On the flyleaf of Miss Abbe's copy he wrote: "Although the . . . vignettes might be considered gothic I tried to avoid a gothic overtone in this book. The colored labels that reach over all the volumes was a pleasant idea, although the wartime inks faded badly." (He actually was mistaken in that it was not wartime.)



Book Cover This is the cover Dwiggins designed with one of his stencil ornaments for the original edition of his book, "Layout in Advertising" (far left above).

Marionettes This pamphlet (near left above), designed and written by Dwiggins, describes how he constructed the marionettes used in his theater.

Metroblack Dwiggins created five published typefaces for the Mergenthaler Linotype Co., including Metroblack (far left below), a sans serif seen today in *Spy* magazine.

Use of Color In H.G. Wells' "Time Machine" (Random House, 1931), Dwiggins creates a striking design by surrounding his own illustration of a group of blind people in a state of terror with a colorful border (below).



MARCO POLO Though not as innovative in its format, "The Travels of Marco Polo," a four-volume set, was every bit as virtuosic. Commissioned by the Printing House of Leo Hart, a small prestigious limited editions publisher, Dwiggins brings his innovative ornamental skills to the fore. The imaginary portrait of Kublai Khan was sketched in watercolor, then a careful drawing for the entire plate was made in black and red ink, accompanied with rough watercolor sketches to show the color separations. The first line (in caps) on the title page is hand-lettered. The awkward word breaks on the rest of the page are deliberate but, says a follower of

Dwiggins, "you have to be in his class to get away with it."

Sequestered in Hingham, away from the capitol of commercial art and design, William Addison Dwiggins was decidedly in a class by himself, but few mavericks were ever as influential. He spawned imitators, yet none were able to recreate the indescribable panache with which his advertising, pamphlets, and books were designed. Dwiggins was the quintessential modern designer/artist and master experimenter of his time.

"Modernism," he wrote with characteristic passion, "is not a system of design—it is a state of mind . . . a natural

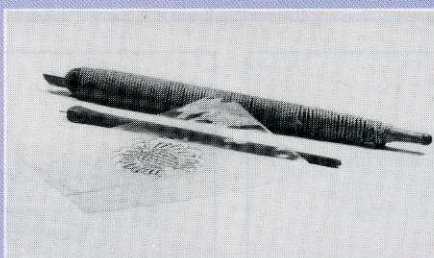
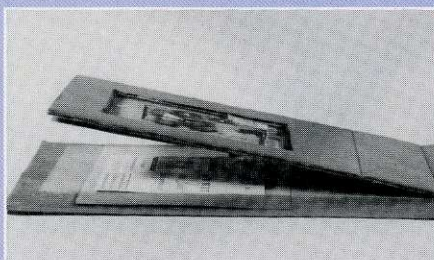
and wholesome reaction against an overdose of traditionalism . . . The graphic results of this state of mind are extraordinary, often highly stimulating, sometimes deplorable." But despite these inevitable problems, Dwiggins lived and worked with a single purpose that "the game is worth the risk." ■

Steven Heller is senior art director of the New York Times and author of "Low Budget High Quality Design" (Watson-Guptill). He was co-curator (with Dorothy Abbe and Louise Fili) of a traveling exhibition of work by W.A. Dwiggins.

DWIGGINS' STENCILLED ORNAMENTS

Editor's Note *One of W.A. Dwiggin's many activities was creating book ornaments for the hundreds of volumes he designed. There were several methods he used to do this. In his first experiments he cut designs from cherry wood and stamped them onto paper into intricate patterns. Because of the uncertainties of this method, he began cutting organic and geometrical shapes from celluloid. He readily combined desired patterns and stencilled them with a brush and India ink. Using this technique, he created decorative ornaments and at times larger illustrations by using the stencils with watercolor. These inventive ornaments worked especially well with type. Near the end of his life, he began making notes on these stencil-making methods. After Dwiggin's death, his partner, Dorothy Abbe, compiled his notes, added additional details from her personal observation and published a 70-page book titled, "Stencilled Ornament & Illustration." (Puterschein-Hingham, 1979; paperback edition, Boston Public Library). The following edited information from that book details how Dwiggin created his stencils.*

It has been interesting to see how the elements could be used to construct pictorial subjects: landscapes, dramatic incidents with figures, etc. The question naturally arises: Why use stencilled scraps for this purpose? Particularly with the geometrical lot, the excuse for the indirect attack is the fact that the assembled elements provide extra-sharp and emphatic statement—a kind of conventionalization arrived at unconsciously, that somehow seems in harmony with type letters. For these semipictorial projects I usually made a rough pencil or watercolor sketch of the action or view, and then applied the stencil interpretation on top of the sketch. For vignettes and other pieces of an ornamental nature I have done without sketching, and allowed the elements to bud and grow according to their obvious intentions and relations.



Stencil Tools The designer's tools included a cardboard stencil printing frame (top); needle-point drill and handmade knife (center); and ink, china slab for drying ink, brush, water dish and stencil after use (below).

The most suitable gauge for film, celluloid or otherwise, is 75/1000 of an inch (or thinner). To cut the stencil I have used a knife in the Japanese manner, pushing it ahead with a finger, instead of drawing it toward me. The knives were made from hacksaw blades by careful chipping, grinding, and whetting—the metal blade laid into two pieces of a split wooden handle and bound about with waxed cord. All of this is very much Japanese.

The cutting is done into bits of celluloid taped in place over the pen drawings of the elements. After the ties have been located, a light cutting is made, not

all the way through the film, and if necessary, French chalk rubbed into the scratches. Then over black paper to let you see where to go, a final cut is made through the film.

The stencil brushes are the conventional kind, bought at artists' supply stores, say 3/8-inch barrel with stiff bristles 1/2-inch long.

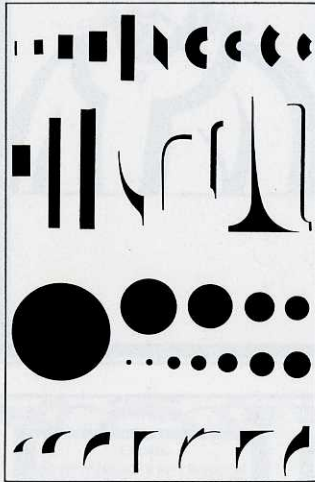
I brush out Higgins' drawing ink on a china slab and charge the stencil brush from this. To charge the brush properly is the critical point in the operation. Too much ink will run out under the stencil plate and destroy the design; too little will call for a dangerous amount of scrubbing. The right amount, found out only by trial and error, will cut the edges sharply. After the stencilling is done, if the design requires it, the ties are filled in with a pen.

Small stencils for monochrome printing can be used without any sort of mounting, although extra care in handling is required. However, if a stencil device is to be used often, it is desirable to tape it to the bottom of a piece of cardboard in which an opening has been cut slightly larger than the design. The card serves as a convenient "handle," helps to hold in place the material to be stencilled, and makes it visible as it lies on the drawing table. A clean, transparent stencil can be very elusive!

All the pigments are water-soluble. For black, Higgins' waterproof drawing ink; for transparent colors, tube watercolors; for opaque colors, "Chinese white" tinted with tube watercolors, of poster colors of good quality. With a palette knife, pigments are spread out thin on glass plates and allowed to dry. To load the brush with just enough pigment (and not too much!) the tip of the handle of the brush is dipped into a cup of water, a drop or two snapped off onto the plate, and the pigment scrubbed up.

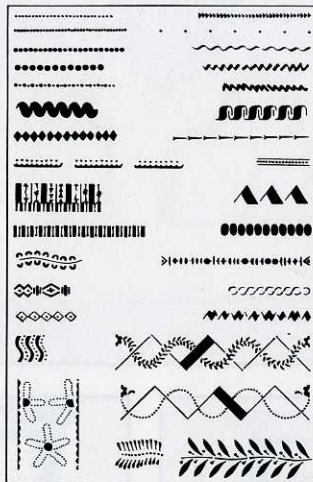
To wash a stencil, moisten it under the faucet, place it flat on the sink, sprinkle with fine cleansing powder, rub with ball of finger, and rinse. Dry by placing it flat between paper towels.

GEOMETRICAL ELEMENTS



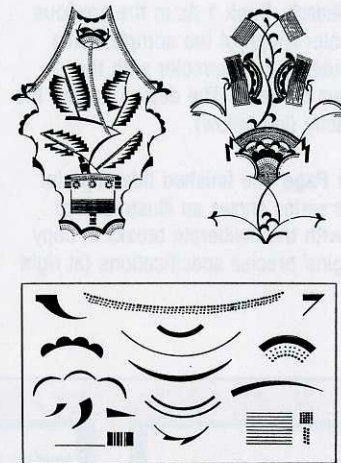
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RULE & BORDER ELEMENTS



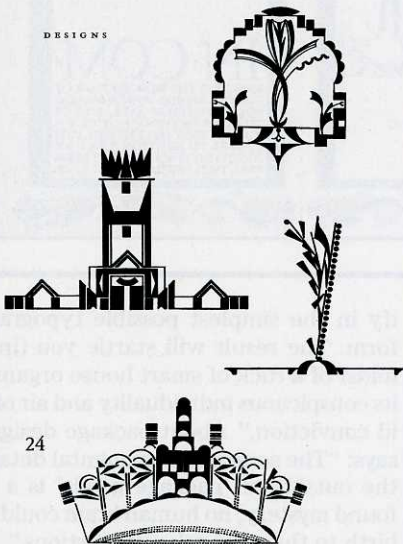
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DESIGNS & ELEMENTS



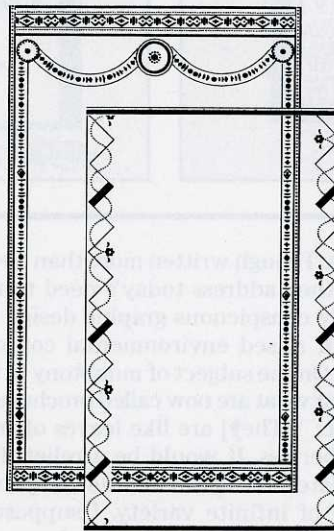
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DESIGNS

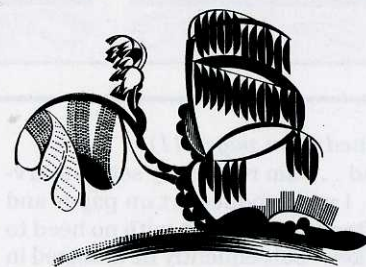


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BORDER DESIGNS



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TYPOGRAPHICAL STENCIL DESIGNS

Book Ornaments From geometrical elements and stencil patterns, Dwiggins would create a variety of decorative spot illustrations, borders, dingbats and so on. These represent a range of his ornaments and include geometrical elements and designs (left, above and below); rule and border elements and designs (center, above and below); and various elements and designs (right, above and below).