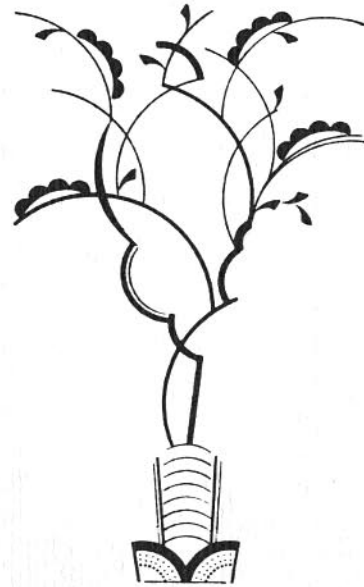




TYPOGRAPHIC
TREASURES:
THE WORK OF
W. A. DWIGGINS



ORGANIZED BY
DOROTHY ABBE,
LOUISE FILI AND
STEVEN HELLER

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W. A. DWIGGINS (1880—1956)

It is said that in the early Twenties, William Addison Dwiggins coined the term “graphic designer” in order to define his own expansive role as an applied artist. Whether or not this attribution is accurate, the designation certainly fits the man. For as imprecise as it may sometimes be, the definition of a graphic designer is surely mirrored in the life and work of W. A. Dwiggins. Bill, W. A. D., or as he was affectionately known, Dwig, was among the first American artists to gather the many and diverse graphic



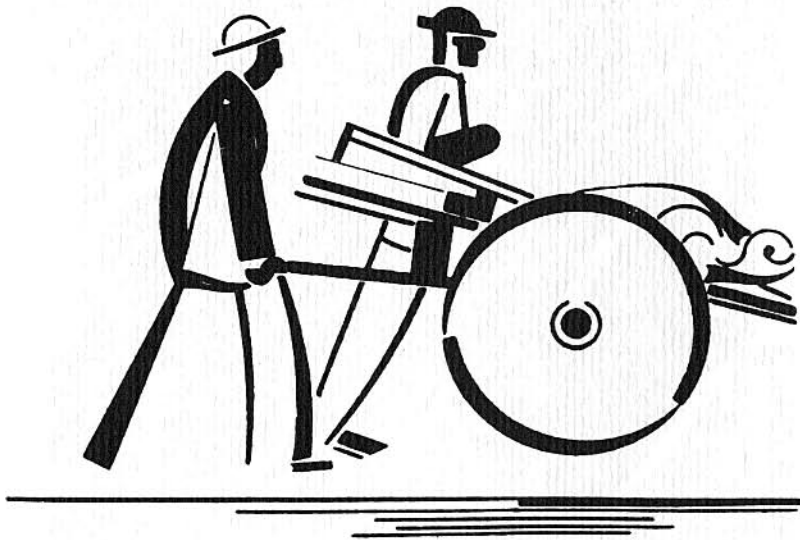


arts into one seamless profession. He was a remarkable calligrapher, illustrator, advertising, book and book jacket designer. He visually defined the trade book for Alfred A. Knopf. He was a master of the new ornament, significant for its rejection of rococo mannerisms. In 1919 he founded the Society of Calligraphers; and as the mythical Hermann Pütterschein, Dwiggins and Dorothy Abbe ran the Hingham/Pütterschein Press. He was an astute, acerbic and prolific author of books and articles on design, one of the field's most early and effective critics. He was, moreover, the quintessential commercial artist, intimately



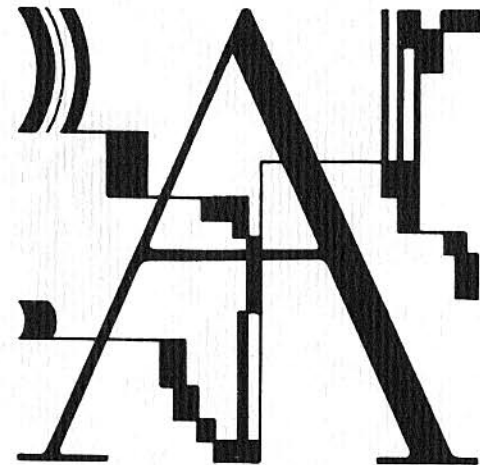
involved with the process of manufacturing fine printed materials for mass consumption.

Dwiggins lived his design. Virtually every detail of his quotidian life bore his distinctive mark, from the most ephemeral first class mail sticker to his striking studio building and many of its contents – furniture, rugs, lampshades. He also brought his design sensibilities to an equally demanding, though, playful passion, the art of puppetry, for which he served as playwright, director, stage manager, scenic designer, inventor, and creator of an outstanding repertory of marionettes. On performance nights, the



first floor of his studio building was transformed into a theater complete with a proscenium stage beautifully ornamented by Dwiggins himself. Even the tickets and no smoking signs were lovingly designed by the artist. Now on permanent exhibit at the Boston Public Library, the stage, scenery and marionettes are vivid examples of his enlarged vision of graphic design.

Dwiggins' achievements were central to the study and practice of American graphic design for decades. Although his influence ebbed in the Forties, when the tidal wave of European theory hit the American shores, many



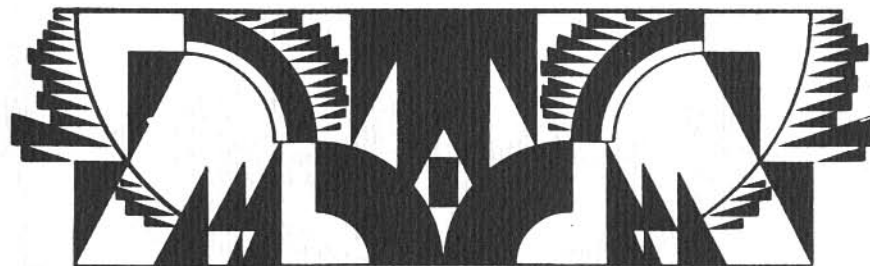
admirers continued to study his work. Regrettably, today he is virtually unknown among a generation of young design Turks, yet the variety, intelligence and beauty of his work, as represented in this exhibition, should continue to be an inspiration. Given the current twists and turns of fashion, Dwiggins' work seems truly timeless. His published writings and unpublished notes and letters on everything from typefaces in progress to the use of watermarks evidence a striving for perfection.

Dwiggins is the missing link in the history of design — a bridge between the classical and the modern. While



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W. A. DWIGGINS

A splendid desk manual for all copy-writers. It contains an abundance of practical suggestions on advertising layout. The text is copiously illustrated with sketches by the author, who is widely known in the advertising and typographical world.

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he issued some sharp critiques on the design practices of his day — some of them aimed at the Bauhaus and its exponents — Dwiggins' approach was often unorthodox and sometimes went counter to classical wisdom. While adhering to certain venerable tenets, he also realized and acted upon the need for change, particularly in the light of new technologies. While he opposed the modernists in his unswerving adherence to ornament, his designs were distinctively new, being a unique confluence of oriental and Mexican motifs that were curiously consistent with Art Deco and Constructivist forms. His san serif, Metro, one



of twelve types he designed, was as much a face of the future as Paul Renner's Futura.

Dwiggins might be described as a Renaissance man — his involvement with art, music, theater and invention certainly qualifies him as such — but this does not quite do him justice. Dwiggins' life cannot be neatly pigeonholed. Even with an exhibition of this scope a detailed understanding of the complete Dwiggins is impossible. What one does learn from this retrospective, however, is that his life was one with his art, and that his art is a landmark in the history of graphic design. — **Steven Heller**



A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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