

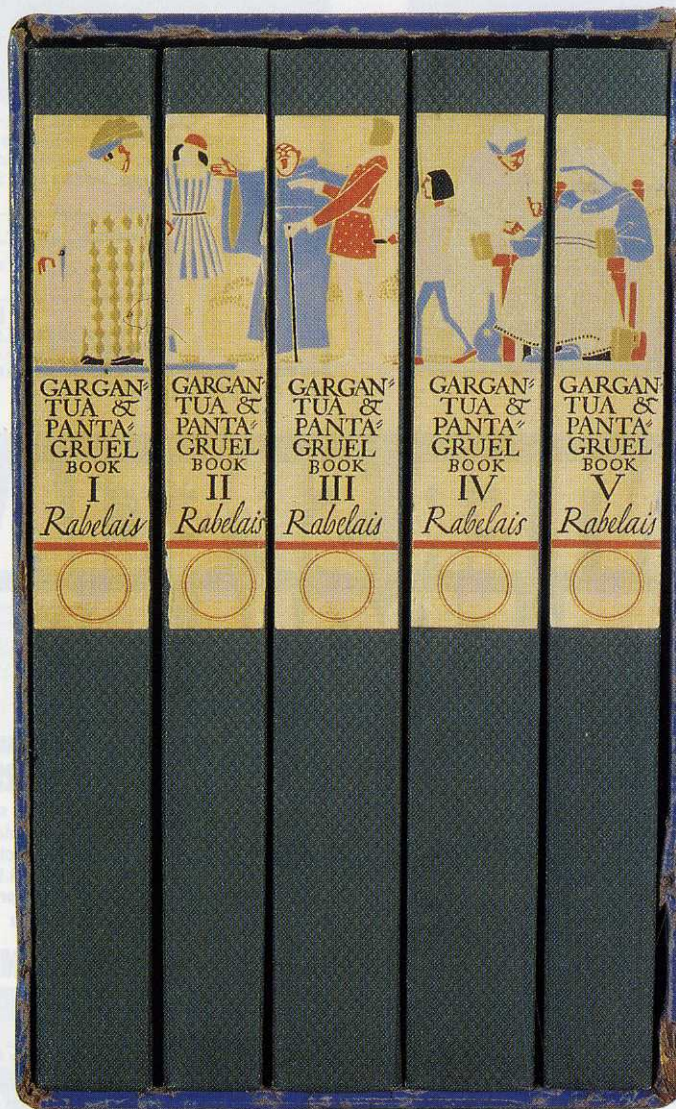
# W.A. Dwiggins: Master of the Book

*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, likely 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.

