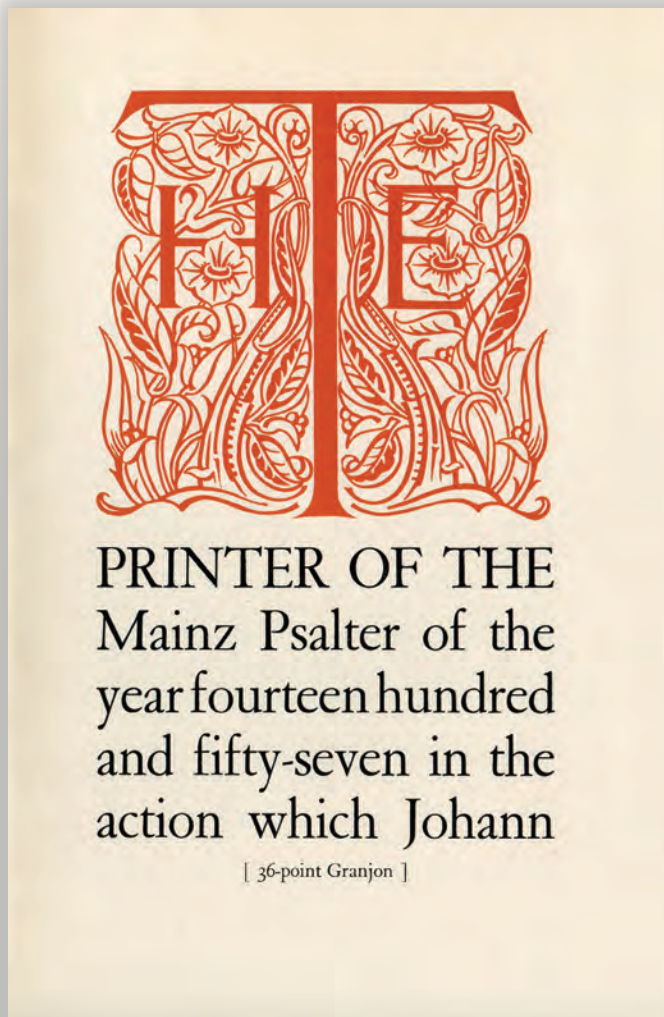


LEONARD JAY

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY TYPOGRAPHER AND PRINTER

Caroline Archer

I was never taught how to be a typographer; I never went to design school. However, I was fortunate to have been brought up in a house where metal type was stored under the stairs; printers' ink was kept in the bedroom; paper was stacked where clothes should have hung; and printing presses lived where a car might have been garaged. In such an environment it was difficult to avoid being schooled in the typographic arts.



The Mainz Psalter, an example of fine edition book design from the Birmingham School of Printing.



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Leonard Jay, Head of the Birmingham School of Printing.

Learning from My Father

My printing education came partly through osmosis and partly from natural inquisitiveness; but to a large degree it was the result of the patient but enthusiastic tuition of a father who loved his work as a compositor. With him I learned how to draw letters, to analyse text, produce layouts, compose type and print: not as classroom exercises, but as real jobs for real people.

In the 1930s, my father had been fortunate to have been a pre-apprentice compositor under Leonard Jay (1888–1963), Head of the Birmingham School of Printing (BSP) 1925–53. Here he received a strong, wide-ranging and inclusive typographic education from which I benefited nearly half a century later.

Early Influences on Jay

Born in Bungay, Suffolk in 1888, Jay came from a family steeped in printing, for his father, uncles and aunts were all employed by the local, but reputable, printing house of Richard Clay. In addition, his mother, a teacher at the Norwich Board School, filled the family home with volumes of the English classics. The maternal concern for the meaning of words coupled with the paternal interest in the look of those words exerted a dual influence on the young Jay, giving him a respect both for the materiality of books as well as the book as a literary work of art.

In 1889 Jay's father took up an appointment at the Oxford University Press, before moving to London in 1893. It was here in 1905, at the age of sixteen, that Jay became a bound apprentice to C F Hodgson & Son, educational printers in High Holborn, and where he gained his first taste for the complexities of typography.

Jay supplemented his workshop knowledge with that of formal education at the Central School of Arts & Crafts, London, attending the recently established typography classes run by J H Mason, calligraphy under Edward Johnston and wood engraving with Bernard Adeney. Jay benefited from Mason's belief in the interdependence of the various crafts and skills, but Mason's teaching was in defiance of modern industrial processes: his concern was to encourage the handcrafts and to release young minds from what he saw as the chains and shackles of industrial life.

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In a brave move Jay installed modern machinery at the School.



The School of Printing was based at Birmingham's famous Art School in Margaret Street.

Teaching at the Birmingham School of Printing

In 1912 Mason invited Jay to become his first assistant in the instruction of typography. However, Jay was not subservient to Mason's teaching philosophy and challenged his mentor's approach by introducing students to the possibilities of technology, and by demonstrating that when imbued with life and beauty, work produced by machine could be as fine as work of the past which had been produced by hand.

In 1925, Jay was given the opportunity to put his beliefs to the test, when he was appointed the first Head of the City of Birmingham School of Printing, a department of the School of Arts & Crafts. On arrival, Jay inherited two half-day classes for compositor apprentices, some evening classes, and a pre-apprentice class for composing. On these slender foundations Jay began his life's work of demonstrating that beautiful printing could be produced at an economic price by sensitive, educated artist-craftsmen controlling machinery in the same way earlier craftsmen controlled tools.

To introduce technology into art schools was a courageous move in the 1920s when it was viewed with misgiving and suspicion. But when the education committee witnessed the beautiful work Jay and his students produced by machine, its concerns were allayed and the BSP flourished. By 1927 the range of classes had grown and the teaching staff had increased to four. At his retirement in 1953, nearly 550 students attended the school and there were seventy-four classes.

The Birmingham School and Printing Industry

The *raison d'être* of the BSP was to serve the essential needs of the local printing industry by providing an adequate supply of intelligent and well-educated apprentices who would benefit the trade and be a credit to the craft of printing. The work of the Birmingham printers was to provide printing for the largest industrial centre outside London. Thus no other School in the provinces had such a large responsibility to the printing industry and the BSP had a corresponding influence and importance both within and without its boundaries. The trade appreciated the work of the BSP and stood enthusiastically behind the ambitions of Jay who cultivated and preserved those contacts.

The students recruited to the school were all local boys who enrolled on the pre-apprentice courses between the ages of twelve-and-a-half and thirteen years of age and underwent a programme of training which lasted three years. Jay took all reasonable precautions to select boys with an ability to profit from instruction. Admission to the BSP was by an entrance exam where potential students were tested on their general knowledge, spelling, comprehension and vocabulary; they were also required to demonstrate an ability at drawing, to transcribe a sheet of badly-written text, take down a page of dictation and paste-up a title page: bursaries were available to a limited few.

Education and Practical Training

Daily life for the boys was regimented and highly disciplined. Any boy who entered the School after the bell sounded was accounted late and the doors were closed on those who failed to arrive on time.

The school day was full: in addition to their chosen trade subject, all students had to learn drawing and continue with their general education in English, history, geography and mathematics. Jay also understood that a healthy body produced a healthy mind and that all boys should be 'fitted by both education and physique to become efficient and competent printers'. Thus 'games' were an essential part of the curriculum.

Nowhere was discipline implemented with more rigour than in the trade classes. Under Jay's supervision the boys were introduced to the realistic problems of advertising and commercial design: a brave move at a time when there was little evidence of any intellectual integrity in advertising.

Jay believed all boys under his tutelage should have the opportunity to produce at least one piece of work of great distinction of which they could be justly proud.

The first book designed, composed, illustrated and printed by the boys of the BSP was a passage from The Book of Ecclesiasticus, 'Let us now praise famous men'. This was followed by over 150 publications, the last of which to be produced under the guidance of Jay was the *Collects and Gospels from the Book of Common Prayer*. Each text was carefully chosen by Jay to uplift, edify and instruct the student.

The publications of the BSP won praise throughout the world for the high quality of their design and production, the wide range of excellent typefaces, and incomparable typography. The work was tantalisingly flawless from the technical perspective; that is from the point of view of good printing. On the artistic side, in terms of colour values, balance, harmony, and the marrying of typography with illustration, the work was beyond criticism.

From the beginning of their production, they became collectors' pieces, not only for their artistry but also for their content.

A Man of Great Influence

Leonard Jay, Head of the Birmingham School of Printing, was a teacher *par excellence* who influenced the outlook of a whole generation of student printers, thereby making a significant contribution to British printing education in the first half of the twentieth century. He made the BSP one of the most efficient and

progressive schools of printing in the country, or possibly any other country, and there can be little doubt that it was through his vision and industry that the School occupied such an honoured place among printing schools on both sides of the Atlantic.

Leonard Jay made a major contribution to the development of technical education. His combination of idealism and practical vision transformed not only the work of the Birmingham School but, in due course, the prevailing landscape of typography in one of the largest and most important centres of printing in Britain, and Europe.

However, I would argue that Jay's most important legacy is those boys who trained under him and who took their learning into printing businesses throughout the country and thereby helped to raise standards in the industry. And his bequest does not stop with the cohort he trained: that generation educated the next, and I for one am a grateful beneficiary of the teachings of Leonard Jay. ●

Dr Caroline Archer is Reader in Typography and Director of The Typographic Hub at Birmingham Institute of Art & Design, Birmingham City University.

Further Reading

Birmingham School of Printing Archives: Birmingham City University, Art and Design Archives.

Leonard Jay Collection: University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections.

The Torch, Vols 1, 2, & 3, City of Birmingham School of Printing, 1933, 1938, 1950.

Lawrence Wallis, *Leonard Jay, master printer-craftsman, first Head of the Birmingham School of Printing 1925-53: an appraisal* (Charles Skilton Ltd, 1963).

GLAD TIDINGS & CHEER

- Christmas Wreath Making
Fri 6 December 9am – 12noon & 1 – 4pm
- Christmas Ghost Tour
Fri 13 December 7pm & 8pm