Helmut Salden: his book-jackets and monograms*

Among those who left Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933 were a large number of graphic designers. Berthold Wolpe, John Heartfield, Jakob Hegner and Hans Schmoller settled in England (Schmoller actually just after the war). The most famous of these emigrants is certainly Jan Tschichold. He left for Switzerland and was later, in 1947, to go to England where he developed a new, now famous, design for Penguin Books. George Salter, a celebrated designer of book-jackets, began a new career in New York in 1934, and with great success. Modernists such as Herbert Bayer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (a Hungarian living in Germany) also went to the United States. The immigrants who enriched the Netherlands in the thirties included Henri Friedlaender, Susanne Heynemann, Hajo Rose, Helmut Salden, Paul L. Urban and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart.

Helmut Salden (1910-96) had studied at the Folkwangschule in his native Essen (Germany): lettering with Wilhelm Poetter and advertising design and photography with Max Burchartz, an admirer of De Stijl. Burchartz’s work was illustrated in Jan Tschichold’s early publications. He was a member of the Ring Neuer Werbegestalter, along with Tschichold, Paul Schuitema, Georg Trump and Piet Zwart. Salden began to assist Burchartz even before completing his studies. In 1931, immediately after his graduation, he joined the photography department, which was under Burchartz’s charge. In that same year, he helped Burchartz set up the international exhibition, ‘Kunst der Werbung,’ held in Essen. As an anti-Nazi, Salden had to flee the country in 1934. Four years later, after wandering around Europe, he found himself in the Netherlands. Here he worked with Piet Zwart among others – the memory of these months was to give him little pleasure. Burchartz, moreover, remained in Germany and joined several National Socialist organizations.

Unlike Tschichold, Salden never renounced his modernist past. He retained a preference for the use of lowercase exclusively (‘absolute Kleinschreibung’).

* This piece originally appeared in Dutch in Scripta mutament: drukletters over schoomsschrift (Amsterdam University Library 1997), a collection of articles for A.R.A. Croiset van Uchelen, compiled by Piet Visser. This publication did not include footnotes. Thanks to Katja Vranken, I was able to use the Salden archive for my article, which is reprinted here with a few changes. This archive includes a copy of Menno ter Braak’s unpublished Halcyon article, ‘Helmut Salden’. Its text was published without illustrations in the fourth volume of Ter Braak’s Verzameld werk. Readers of Querendo, by the way, know Salden through his drawn lettering for its title; in earlier volumes, the additional lettering on the cover was also his work.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1998

Querendo 28/2
For his own personal notices, he used no capitals at all. He also continued to use sans-serif (grotesque) forms in his drawn lettering. In *Elementare Typographie* (1925), a special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, Tschichold had declared: ‘Elementare Schriftform ist die Groteskschrift aller Variationen: mager-halbfett-fett-schmal bis breit’ (p. 198), and one year later, in an article for the periodical *Die Form*, Burchartz wrote: ‘Alle Typen außer der Groteskschrift . . . könnten eingeschmolzen werden. Die Groteskschrift ist unverschnörkelt einfach, klar, deutlich, bestens lesbar.’

Salden always had a great respect for Jan Tschichold, eight years his senior. Tschichold’s work, and especially his publications *Elementare Typographie* and *Die neue Typographie* (1928), made him the most influential champion of the modern movement. But with *Typographische Gestaltung* (1935) he had already taken a step back. In 1946 he distanced himself even more radically from his earlier opinions in ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit,’ an article in *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*: the New Typography was useful in advertising and other kinds of printing, but was actually not suited to the book, especially not to the literary book. It was probably following Tschichold’s footsteps that Salden turned more toward tradition. After the war, he appeared in his book design as a follower of classical — that is, reserved — typography, which aimed at legibility and was often symmetrical. If his book interiors followed the guidelines propagated by antimodernists such as Stanley Morison and J. van Krimpen, he took an undogmatic position in his drawn lettering.

Salden, who sought out Tschichold in Basel in 1946, attached great importance to their limited correspondence. Tschichold responded positively to his work in a letter of 8 August 1948: ‘Sowohl die Arbeiten im Sonderdruck [Halcyon], die offenbar etwas zurückliegen, als auch Ihre Kalligraphie machen einen ausgezeichneten Eindruck, und ich beglückwünsche Sie sehr zu diesen Ergebnissen ihres Fleisses und Geschmacks. Sie haben sich damit der leider nur kleinen Gruppe internationaler Kalligraphen eingereiht, die allein berufen ist, der Entwicklung weitere Anstösse zu geben.’ It was not without pride that Salden gave me (twice in fact) a photocopy of an end-leaf with the manuscript dedication: ‘Herrn Helmut Salden in Hochachtung. Jan Tschichold, Basel, Juni 1955.’ Around 1990 he made a JF monogram intended for an edition of Tschichold’s work.

For Salden, printed or drawn letters were first and foremost the conveyers of ideas. He believed that their ‘exalted’ value had to be expressed in the form. ‘A letterform,’ he once said to me, ‘has to float a bit, not give the impression that it is heavy and bound to sink.’ He was somewhat disturbed by G.W. Ovink’s comparison of his work with that of F.H. Ernst Schneidler in *Anderhalve eeuw boektypografie* (1965, p. 398). Schneidler’s experimental approach to lettering was a far cry from his own practice. Salden didn’t wish to leave anything to chance: he was conscious of every tenth of a millimeter in his designs. Yet in his drawn