The Indépendant, a Typeface as Period Document

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Abstract
The Indépendant is a modish display type from 1930 which was cast in Brussels by Etablissements Plantin, the Belgian branch of the Dutch company ‘Lettergieterij Amsterdam’ (Amsterdam Type Foundry). The typeface was designed by G. Collette and J. Dufour, probably by using matrices that were engraved in the Netherlands. It is the only hot-metal typeface which was created in Belgium in the twentieth century and the history of this design provides an interesting point of departure for the historiography of graphic design in Belgium during the interwar period. Because nothing is known about the designer duo Collette and Dufour and there exist no other typeface creations of theirs, it is sometimes suggested that the Indépendant might be based on a German source of inspiration. Research has shown that sure enough it is an original design, to which Henry van de Velde also reacted enthusiastically. By referring with its name to the hundredth anniversary of the national independance, the Indépendant set itself up as a concept specific to Belgium. However, the typeface fits into a much larger picture and is linked up with the international predilection for reduction and standardization of the modernists. But more than anything else the Indépendant is an art deco typeface which sought to conquer the market by responding to a generally felt need for heavier display types which had arisen in the late twenties both in America and in Europe. The Indépendant was however not an innovating design, but the typographic transformation of a trendy letter form which had been in existence for a longer period of time in other contexts and disciplines. Not surprisingly, it soon passed into disuse.

Keywords
display type, type design, art deco, Belgium, history of type foundries, Etablissements Plantin, graphic design, Jos Léonard, Henry van de Velde

The Indépendant or the ‘Onafhankelijke’ is the only Belgian typeface which is recorded in Lewis Blackwell’s popular survey, *20th century type*. It is a prominent display type from 1930 which is reproduced in the book using a

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brightly-coloured print from the promotion folder with which it was launched (illus. 1). Because the author describes the typeface as a ‘highly stylized face [...] from the Amsterdam Type Foundry, designed by G. Collette and J. Dufour’, the suggestion is created that it concerns a Dutch production but actually it is a Belgian design. It is also an established fact that the typeface was cast in Brussels at Etablissements Plantin, a branch of the ‘Lettergieterij Amsterdam’ but there is a great chance that the matrices of the Indépendant were engraved in the Amsterdam parent company. This modish typeface soon passed into disuse but it remains of special interest because it is illustrative of the typographic situation in Belgium during that period. The story of this design is so closely entwined with the country of origin that its study provides a surprising point of departure for the historiography of graphic design in Belgium during the interwar period.

A few months after the Indépendant had been launched, the trade journal *La Chronique Graphique* devoted an article to this new typeface. It explains how it was released on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Belgian independence and that its name refers to the celebration of this event. The journal believed that there would be a large potential market for this product, for, as it was argued, the Brussels typographer Herman Dillens had already won a gold medal at the ‘Exposition Nationale du Travail’ with a design that had been set in Indépendant. Moreover, shortly after its release the typeface was purchased by the newly founded ‘Institut supérieur des arts décoratifs’ (isad) of Henry van de Velde. ‘C’est là une sorte de consécration que les maîtres les plus fervents de l’esthétique moderne ont conférée à l’Indépendant’, argued the editors of *La Chronique Graphique*.

Within the Belgian context the release of a new typeface was a remarkable event. After all, it was already thirty years ago that a typeface by a Belgian type designer had been launched. This was Georges Lemmen, who around 1900

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2 Later on *Indépendant* was included in a type specimen book of Etablissements Plantin, *Spécimen de caractères Plantin*: supplément. (Brussels, Etablissements Plantin, c. 1935). Amsterdam University Library, Special Collections, collection of type specimens LP BE EP / G 9 3109 51 x. The typeface was available in sizes 28, 36, 48, 60, 72 and 96.

3 Etablissements Plantin had been founded in September 1911 as a Belgian subsidiary company of Amsterdam Type Foundry (formerly N. Tetterode) and was established in the Jerichostraat, the present Antoon Dansaertstraat in Brussels. There were close contacts with the parent company.

4 With thanks to Mathieu Lommen who pointed this out to me.