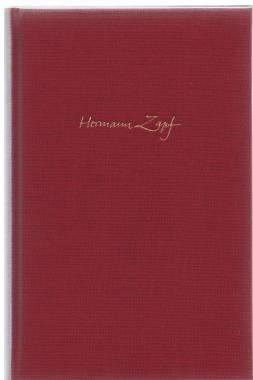


**Book review: *Hermann Zapf and the World He Designed: A Biography*, by Jerry Kelly**

Barbara Beeton

Jerry Kelly, *Hermann Zapf and the World He Designed: A Biography*. The Grolier Club, New York, 2019, hardcover, 364 pp., US\$48.00, ISBN 978-1605830827.



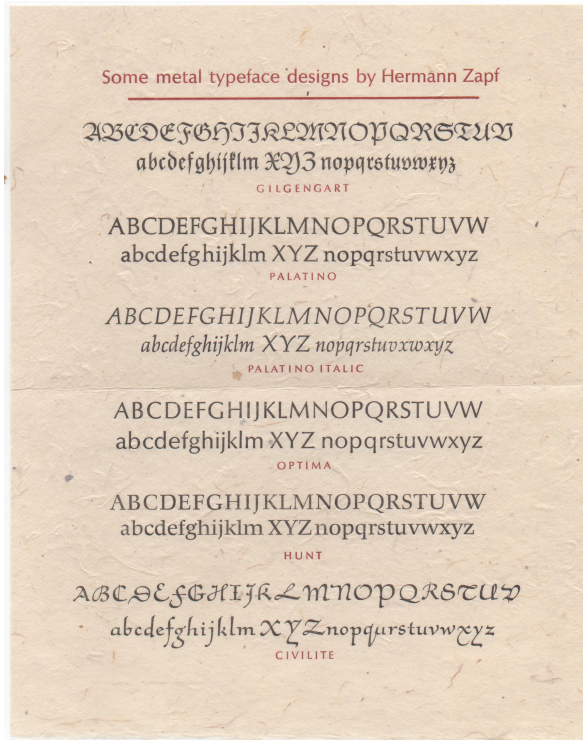
This book, the first comprehensive biography of Hermann Zapf (1918–2015), was published to accompany the Grolier Club exhibition “Alphabet Magic: A Centennial Exhibition of the Work of Hermann & Gudrun Zapf”, curated by Jerry Kelly and Steven Galbraith. The exhibition (February 20–April 27, 2019 [1]) celebrated the centenary of Zapf’s birth.

The volume is handsomely bound in blue cloth stamped in gold. (A deluxe edition, obtained through a Kickstarter campaign,<sup>1</sup> is instead bound in red.) Zapf’s signature appears on the front cover, with the elegant swash  $\angle$  that instantly identifies its creator. The colophon identifies the typefaces used for the text as Palatino nova and Optima nova, the versions of those faces re-implemented by Zapf for electronic technology.

Copious illustrations show not only the many typefaces created by Zapf, but also preliminary designs for some of them, calligraphy specimens (both standalone pieces and book jackets), and some delightful drawings, mostly of flowers and other natural subjects. This is a veritable feast! The current location of these exhibits is often identified in footnotes, providing an itinerary if the reader wishes to inspect the originals. (The deluxe edition includes letterpress samples of some of the metal types, as reproduced here.)

The main narrative is divided into three chronological sections. The first covers the period from

<sup>1</sup> A web page describing a visit to Kelly’s house and vast library [2] mentions the campaign. Both this and the Kickstarter page [5] show many illustrations of Zapf’s work.



Zapf’s birth in 1918 through 1954, the years in which his typefaces were rendered in metal. The period 1952–1975 was the era of phototype. Digital methods became available after that. These are not hard boundaries, and Zapf’s other activities aren’t so easily subdivided, but the division does permit the table of contents to fit on one page. More easily subdivided are the many appendices, which provide important details in a way that makes it easier to look them up. The index is populated mainly by the names of persons, places, typefaces, . . . , namely words that inherently begin with an uppercase letter. It’s not easy to look up a concept, unless one happens to remember the name of a person associated with it. For example, there is no entry for “calligraphy”.

Jerry Kelly first met Zapf as a student, enrolling in a summer calligraphy class at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 1975, and repeating this for seven more years. Kelly was already an accomplished letterpress printer, and in cooperation with the RIT Cary Librarian, undertook to print several tribute works. His friendship with Zapf is not explicated, but is evident throughout the text.

Much of the story of Zapf’s artistic development has been told before by Zapf, in his books including *Alphabet Stories* [3], but this biography enlarges the scope and includes some information that Zapf was apparently unwilling to divulge in his own writing.

During the second period, 1952–1975, a great deal of Zapf’s design work was commissioned by the Stempel foundry. This period saw the creation of many of his best known typefaces: extensions to the Palatino family, Janson (a revival of a type originally designed by Nicolas Kis, in titling sizes to complement the original text types), Melior (which introduced the shape of Piet Hein’s superellipse), and Optima (a revolutionary sans serif with tapered strokes more characteristic of serif types), among others. The initial platform for which these types were designed was the Linotype, which imposed very stringent physical limitations, such as that the same letter in parallel upright and italic fonts must have the same metrics. The later freedom of phototype would permit a rethinking of the consequences of these limitations, and subsequent redesign.

During this period, Zapf also designed numerous books. Although most were published by major German trade publishers, some, in particular his works on typographic subjects, were produced at Stempel’s in-house printing office. Zapf developed many contacts among the skilled craftsmen at Stempel, and when several of these craftsmen went out on their own, Zapf turned to his former colleagues to produce work at the highest level of quality. Although the production of the second volume of his *Manuale Typographicum* was an artistic masterpiece, it was not a commercial success, and Zapf would come to regret taking on the role of publisher. Later works on subjects related to type and calligraphy were managed by other publishers.

The third period, 1975–2015, deals with the post-metal era, during which Zapf continued to design books, revised his existing typefaces and developed new ones for new technology, and got more involved with teaching, for a time holding a professorship at the Rochester Institute of Technology. During this period he also, with Peter Karow, developed the *hz*-program, which uses a per-paragraph justification system and carefully modifies the shapes of letters to achieve uniform interword spacing and optimize the consistent appearance of text.

Of particular interest to the present audience is the information regarding Zapf’s relation to the T<sub>E</sub>X world. The principal focus here is on the Euler font (pp. 236–239), illustrated by an early drawing of the Latin and Greek alphabets. Several of the letters are more angular in this drawing than in the alphabets we see today, and the “u”-like shape of the “y” is said to be a particular request of Knuth. Kelly remarks,

Personally, I feel Euler would have looked better if they would have stuck with Zapf’s original

sharper entry and exit strokes, but Zapf acquiesced to Knuth’s wishes in this matter. (p. 238)

This overlooks the fact that, in a mathematical context, it is essential that each letter be unambiguously recognizable. In the early showing, it is difficult to distinguish the Latin “v” from the “v” (nu); these and other similar shapes have been adjusted in the final version.

Also noted is the recognition by DANTE, at their 1999 annual meeting in Heidelberg, when Zapf was named an honorary member. At the 2000 annual meeting Zapf responded with remarks published in *Die T<sub>E</sub>Xnische Komödie* [4]; these remarks were translated for *TUGboat* with an addendum illustrating the proper traditional page layout for a book [6,7]. (The biography inexplicably lists this a second time (p. 323) for 2010: “Honorary Member of the German TeX Users Group (Heidelberg).”)

## References

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- [4] Frank Mittelbach, “Laudatio auf Professor Hermann Zapf”; Hermann Zapf, “Meine Zusammenarbeit mit Don Knuth und meine Schriftentwürfe”, *Die T<sub>E</sub>Xnische Komödie* 2000:1, 31–44, [archiv.dante.de/DTK/PDF/komoedie\\_2000\\_1.pdf](http://archiv.dante.de/DTK/PDF/komoedie_2000_1.pdf)
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- [6] Frank Mittelbach, “Laudatio for Professor Hermann Zapf”, *TUGboat* 22:1/2 (2001), 24–26, [tug.org/TUGboat/tb22-1-2/tb70laud-revised.pdf](http://tug.org/TUGboat/tb22-1-2/tb70laud-revised.pdf)
- [7] Hermann Zapf, “My collaboration with Don Knuth and my font design work”, *TUGboat* 22:1/2 (2001), 26–30, [tug.org/TUGboat/tb22-1-2/tb70zapf.pdf](http://tug.org/TUGboat/tb22-1-2/tb70zapf.pdf)

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