

Belief in the beautiful

*We know that the tail must wag the dog,
as the horse is drawn by the cart;
But the Devil whoops, as he whooped of old:
“It’s clever, but is it Art?”*
—Rudyard Kipling, “The Conundrum
of the Workshops”

*Have nothing in your houses which you do not
know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.*
—William Morris, “The Beauty of Life”
(1880) in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882)

*Poetry (like a grand personality) is a growth of
many generations—many rare combinations.
To have great poets, there must be great
audiences, too.*
—Walt Whitman, “Ventures, on an Old
Theme” (1882)

OF ALL THE book arts, design is what the Alcuin Society has become known for championing. Through its annual awards recognizing excellence in book design in Canada, the Society has found a *raison d’être* focusing all the other arts of the book from printing to papermaking, calligraphy to illustration and typography. All go towards making beautiful books that are both legible and pleasurable to readers.

Well-designed books have, in turn, set a precedent for expectations of excellence in the presentation of online texts. While the pages on which digital texts appear are a unique environment with a peculiar dynamic based on the tool used to access them—to wit, this year’s changes in the fonts Google and Facebook use given the greater numbers of people accessing these sites from mobile devices—centuries of reading texts on tangible pages (and perhaps even before that, tablets) have shaped how we want to scroll through the texts. (And just look at the language at play—we’ve even transferred old words to the new technologies of reading.)

This issue of *Amphora* takes a special interest in book design, both with a review of the history of the Alcuin awards program on the occasion of the Society’s 50th anniversary, and with a special feature on Jan and Crispin Elsted, proprietors of Barbarian Press in Mission, B.C., and the latest recipients of the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts. But there’s one question this issue won’t answer: what is good design? Sure, we celebrate it, but can we define it?

The quotes at left capture something of the challenge of such an endeavour. The well-known question of Kipling’s poem is one that wags not only throw at designers, but one which dogs designers themselves as they strive for excellence and what public taste—the proverbial cart that draws the horse—will allow.

And public taste is important, with William Morris leaving it open to his audience to exercise their own judgment in what might be beautiful, as well as useful to them. His maxim recognizes the interplay between form and purpose, design and intended use.

But what will guide that judgment? Walt Whitman doesn’t offer any answers, but he underscores that need for discriminating audiences who will demand excellence from their artists—poets, in his case, though he might just as well have said the designers of their books.

One hopes the awards the Alcuin Society has bestowed since its founding have helped establish benchmarks for book design and the book arts in Canada, and shaped public sensibilities regarding excellence in these areas. This is a legacy that not only builds on tradition, but allows it to be passed unimpaired to generations who can extend it in ways we have yet to imagine.

~ Peter Mitham, editor