

## *Hermann Zapf, 1918–2015*

WHILE NEW MEMBERS receive due recognition through a welcome in the pages of *Amphora*, seldom does the Alcuin Society lose a member of such stature to warrant an obituary.

However, such is the case with Hermann Zapf, a long-time friend of the Society who, together with his wife Gudrun Zapf von Hesse, supported the Society's objectives and extended gracious hospitality when members travelled to Leipzig with the winners of the Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada in 2006.

Perhaps the most tangible connection with the Zapfs was Gudrun's gifting of the Alcuin Antiqua typeface to the Society for its use. Gudrun designed the Alcuin family exclusively for the German firm URW++, which released it in 1991, and it was for many years used in the production of *Amphora*. URW++ notes:

The idea of the URW Alcuin typeface family was to develop a modern font based on the forms of the Carolingian minuscule. To create a text font that is perfect for a wide

variety of applications, elements typical for handwriting had to be removed while still preserving the calligraphic flow and character.

The gift strengthened the Society's connection with the famous couple, a tie that not only linked one of the 20th century's foremost type designers with the evolving world of graphic design in Canada, but also linked Canada to Europe's long history of type design in the place where the modern history of printing with moveable type began.

Zapf's influence is hard to dispute, and his work reaches into almost every corner of life, from typefaces such as Palatino (which a fellow writer deems elegant enough to be a surefire way to charm female editors and win commissions) to a family of dingbats for use by computer typesetters. The typeface Optima set the tone for Ridge Winery when its first labels were designed in the late 1960s and remains in use today (it also features on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.), while another Zapf creation, Melior (1952),

**URW ALCUIN PRO**  
**ARCHBISHOP EGBERT OF YORK**  
**CAROLINGIAN COURT**  
Abbot of Saint Martin's at Tours  
**ΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΑΡΤΙΝΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΤΟΥΡ**  
**VITA ALCUINI, a Life written at Ferrières 820**

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*Type sample of URW Alcuin Pro typeface.*

provided a design principle for Stockholm’s famous public square, Sergels Torg. Zapf recounts in his 2007 memoir, *Alphabet Stories*:

To achieve optimal readability in small type sizes, the idea was to facilitate an eye-guiding effect by designing shapes based on an oval fitting as closely as possible inside a rectangle. This became the design principle of ‘Melior Roman’. These shapes were not constructed with ruler and compass, but drawn freehand with my brush.... In 1959 the Dutch mathematician, inventor and poet Piet Hein developed a mathematical formula for such a special form and called it a ‘superellipse’. In the late 1950s, Piet Hein used his superellipse to design a traffic loop in Stockholm’s rectangular city center, known as ‘Sergels Torg’.

It’s fair to say that few type designers can claim a body of work with an influence from page to pavement, bringing to bear on the present a legacy of centuries. The *New York Times* noted in its tribute that Zapf was “prolific and versatile,” creating “around 200 typefaces in numerous alphabets, including Latin, Cyrillic, Arabic and Cherokee, spanning the eras of metal typesetting, phototypesetting and digital typesetting.”

Zapf’s own life spanned an equally broad swath of history. Born in Nuremberg, Germany,

on November 8, 1918, in the closing hours of World War I, Zapf apprenticed as a photo retoucher before joining the Stempel type foundry before the century’s second great war erupted. While retouching photos, Zapf became enamoured of the work of typographer and calligrapher Rudolf Koch—and then, during World War II, served as a mapmaker in Bordeaux, France.

The combination of influences found full expression in Zapf’s life following the war. Writing for the *New York Times* following a retrospective of Zapf’s work at the Grolier Club in 2000, Roberta Smith remarked: “It doesn’t take long to realize that his career demonstrates the combination of natural (probably prodigious) talent, early achievement and continued growth and innovation that we demand of major artists.”

Others have said his career is the sort that creates a watershed in the history of the craft, happening once in a century—though in the case of Zapf, his life was nearly a century long. He was in his 97th year when he died at his home in Darmstadt, Germany, on June 4. He is survived by his wife Gudrun, whom he married in 1951, and three granddaughters; a son, Christian, died in 2012.

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~ Peter Mitham, editor

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

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The Alcuin Society wishes to welcome the following new members:

*Alessandra Bordini, Vancouver, BC*  
*Jarin Bassert, North Vancouver, BC*  
*Lisa Isley, Calgary, AB*

*Kimberley Koch, Vancouver, BC*  
*Susan Lee, New Westminster, BC*  
*Mary Luebbe, Vancouver, BC*

Alcuin Society membership is open to any individual, institution or organization with an interest in the book arts, the history of books, book collecting and reading. An individual membership is \$50 a year, while institutional membership is \$75 a year. Students may join at the rate of \$25 a year for up to three years. A patron membership is available at the rate of \$125.

Society members within Canada pay in Canadian dollars; foreign memberships must be paid in U.S. dollars. Payment may be made online using PayPal or via cheque or money order made payable to The Alcuin Society, P.O. Box 3216, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 3X8.

