

Book Review

Rollin Milroy

Notes on Book Design. Derek Birdsall.
New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004.
236 p., illus. US\$45

Coffee table books were invented as the default Christmas present for when we couldn't think of anything else to give someone. Publishers even gave the things a name that told us where to put them. They're big, expensive (or at least look expensive), and have lots of pictures but not much text - they're for looking at more than extended reading. Derek Birdsall's *Notes on Book Design* is basically just another coffee table book. It's fine for flipping through, but as a reference, it pales in comparison to even such journeyman classics as Marshall Lee's *Book Design* (1967). Judged, however, as a record of Birdsall's book designs, it's fine. Using selected projects from his 40-year career, it provides insight to his preferences as a designer, and more significantly, the process by which he thought through each of the designs presented. These highlight the challenges he encountered (which won't always be obvious to the casual viewer), and the solutions he arrived at.

The books presented here are predominately gallery and artist catalogues, and after flipping through 200 pages of reproductions, they start to look pretty much the same (though this is most likely because the books themselves are pretty much the same, and a designer can only do so much to distinguish one from another). Having spent most of his career designing these kinds of books, maybe it shouldn't be a surprise that *Notes on Book Design* takes the same approach. There is a heavy emphasis on the visuals, and the text is kept as terse as possible.

"I have attempted to show that book designs I have produced are based on simple discoverable facts about the books themselves," Birdsall writes in the introduction. This he does in short commentaries accompanied by the book's real strength, the abundance of colour reproductions from dozens of his projects. And his decision "that the minimum number of spreads shown [from each project] should be similar to the kind of presentation one might make to a publisher" was a good one. As he intended, it provides a better understanding of how different kinds of content are handled.

Birdsall tells us his book is not intended to be prescriptive, and it isn't. Unlike Marshall's book (which I've used numerous times to remind myself of, for example, the difference between a preface, foreword and introduction), Birdsall does not provide specific guidance for the proper use and role of the 46 possible components of a book listed on the cover; perhaps the fact that they're not listed alphabetically should have disabused me of that assumption. Instead these things are discussed in passing, and usually fleetingly, in the brief texts that accompany the numerous page samples.



Orchid Cactus © 1988 McGregor Hone

For example, Birdsall's appendix does not include *preface*. It does include *prelim (frontmatter)*, with two page references. Here is the extent of his information on the topic: "The endmatter and also the introductory pages were printed on a cream paper to clarify this construction" (p.139) and "Roman numerals are used for this introduction, a system which stems from the need to start setting and imposing the main text before the front matter is ready - or its extent unknown" (p.167). This last quote illustrates the overall quality of relationship between the text and images: the photo immediately below shows a contents page, on which we can clearly see the use of roman numerals for introductory page numbers. Writing the sentence as "Roman numerals typically are used for introductions due to the need to start setting and imposing the main text before the front matter is ready - or its extent unknown" would have been a more elegant construction tying the words to the image used. (Note also the different spellings of *frontmatter* in the text and index.)

The danger of creating a book about book design is, it can become the single representation of all the designer's work. I do not find this a particularly lovely book. First, the brand new copy sent for review started peeling out of its case as soon as it was opened. Birdsall can't be held responsible for the crappy state of trade case bindings, but someone should have considered the implications of a cheap binding on a book about book design. Then I had to spend quite some time getting past the typeface Birdsall chose for the interior notes. He's picked a typewriter face reproduced from an old

Olivetti he'd once used. While his introductory notes about the book's design claim he has rarely been "more sure of my choice of a typeface," he may well also have never been more wrong. His publisher's comment that it looks "mannered" hits the mark, and it is not pleasant to read or see on a page. It may even exaggerate the sometimes awkwardly terse notes. If anything, the typeface fails the book designer's equivalent to the Hypocratic oath: do not distract from what the words are saying. But to Birdsall's credit, this kind of esthetic criticism is mitigated by his approach: you may not agree with the choices Birdsall makes, but at least he explains his thought process.

The chapter I found most interesting (or perhaps I should simply say interesting) is the last, about his commission to design a new edition of the book of *Common Worship* for the Church of England. Perhaps this is because all the other books discussed up to this point have been catalogues of one type or another, for which detailed grid systems are developed and imposed, with the emphasis being on the visuals and text playing a secondary role. By contrast the prayer book is just text, and Birdsall's talent for creating with only type and proportions shines. Based on the reproductions here, he succeeded in creating an elegant and beautiful book. Using different sizes of Gill Sans, in two colours on a cream sheet, the book reflects the best traditions of book design while simultaneously being clearly of our time. To my mind, this should be the goal of any book designer seeking to be innovative while still serving the text. I was left wanting to buy (and even read) a copy of the book, which is

About the Artist

McGregor Hone

no small admission for a heathen.

Notes on Book Design would be of interest to professional designers who like to have collections of others' work, to leaf through from time to time for inspiration. It is not a reference book, in the way Marshall's or Robert Bringhurst's *Elements of Typographic Style* are. (The appendix, with a handful of Birdsall's favourite typefaces presented in various settings and some sample grid systems, is not nearly broad enough in scope to be of frequent use.) The brief recountings of each book's creation, and the comments about dealing with clients and design committees, are humorous or interesting - once. Fans of Birdsall's book designs, or big fat art books, will be pleased by this compendium of a career's work; students of book design will not find it useful.



Barnyard Pride © 1982 McGregor Hone

Born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, McGregor Hone received his Bachelor of Arts degree cum laude from the University of Saskatchewan. He studied art with Ernest Lindner, Gus Kenderdine, Dr. G. Snelgrove and Dr. Les Saunders in Saskatoon and at Emma Lake. He then studied drawing with Cecil Collins, painting with Hans Tisdale, and wood engraving with Gertrude Hermes in London, England. He taught school for many years in British Columbia and at Central Collegiate in Regina. For his long service to education the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation awarded him an Honourary Life Membership and the Superannuated Teachers of Saskatchewan bestowed the same honour upon him.

McGregor was elected as a member of the Canadian Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers (CPE) and the Canadian Society of Graphic Arts (both organizations now defunct). He is currently a member of the Wood Engravers Network. In 2005 he produced his 67th annual, consecutive "Greeting Print" (these have been made over the years in various print media). In 1995 he received the Saskatchewan Arts Board Lifetime Award for Excellence in the Arts.

He has produced and exhibited wood and polystyrene engravings and linoleum block prints, silk screen and embossed prints, as well as drawings, paintings and sculpture.

His work is in the collections of many individuals, galleries and museums. An interest in myths, insects and travel often appears in his work.

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