

THE UNFATHOMABLE DEPTH OF LETTERS

Hermann and Gudrun Zapf regard hand lettering as a veritable gene pool of ideas for all aspects of the book arts. By Marlene Chan

HERMANN ZAPF AND Gudrun Zapf von Hesse's enthusiasm for expressing their combined talents in typography, book design and binding remains undiminished at age 88, perhaps because they still see innumerable possibilities for their creative output. They seem to regard hand lettering as a veritable gene pool for ideas, the depth of which remains unfathomable. Their enthusiasm for the book arts is boundless, as Leah Gordon, Alan Stein and I discovered on our visit to their home after attending the Leipzig Book Fair in March. It was truly an unforgettable "time out of time" experience.

During the three-hour train voyage from Leipzig, in the former East Germany, to the Zapfs' home in Darmstadt, in the Hesse region of Germany, we witnessed the slow transition and struggle towards a more economically unified and prosperous country: abandoned and derelict buildings and factories still dominate the East German landscape en route. While a stark contrast between east and west remains in evidence after *Die Wende* (the Change) of 1989, there are also signs of rejuvenation and new construction, generating an excitement about life here and now, and an optimistic outlook for the future.

The train trip was, in a way, a parallel introduction to our gracious hosts, who were both born in turbulent times: Hermann in 1918 in Nuremberg, and Gudrun, in the same year, in Schwerin. Before they met at the D. Stempl AG type foundry in Frankfurt in 1948, where Hermann was art director, they had separately, in their own hometowns of Weimar and Nuremberg, undertaken personal intensive study of calligraphy through close examination of the instructional manuals of Rudolf Koch and Edward Johnston. Initially self-taught, Hermann and Gudrun became master calligraphers, and all of their type designs have been informed by hand lettering. (One of Gudrun's typefaces, Columbine, was derived from her personal handwriting.) Together they have executed all the myriad aspects of the lettering arts—calligraphy, type design, book design and bookbinding—achieving popular success in an age favouring technology.

Alan Stein, a printer and wood engraving artist, is proprietor of the Church Street Press in Parry Sound, Ontario. To the delight of the Zapfs, he brought a copy of his personally illustrated, 2004 Alcuin Book Design Award winner, *In Smoke: Ten Variations on Eugenio Montale*, by Gary Michael Dault, bound in luxurious crimson leather by Taylor & Murdoch. Alan seemed wistful at first, watching the legendary couple, each in turn, pore over every page with what seemed like a magnifying glass ground from decades of experience. They were totally absorbed. Throughout they asked questions about technique and the creative process. Alan was relieved only at the end when they independently highly praised his work. Anyone who knows Hermann will not be surprised that, having been to the Georgian Bay area north of Toronto on one of his trips to Canada, he was then also keen to ask Alan about the physical environment where he lives in northern Ontario and especially about the Aboriginal communities living in the area.

Of the two, Hermann may be the best known and most prolific with regard to type design (with over 200 designs to his credit, most notably Palatino and Optima), but through the couple's playful intellectual repartee, we were left with no doubt of their mutual affection, admiration and respect one for the other. Gudrun (who spends almost every day in her studio and completed a painting the morning of the day we arrived) won the Frederic W. Goudy Award from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1991, the same award received by Hermann in

1968 as the first recipient. She was only the second woman ever to receive this award; Edna Beilenson was the first, in 1980. In accepting the award, Gudrun described her relationship with Hermann as “competitive.” She further describes it in the context of their contributions to a modern aesthetic in book and type design in much greater detail in the catalogue/publication *Calligraphic Type Designs in the Digital Age: An Exhibition in Honor of the Contributions of Hermann and Gudrun Zapf*, produced following a “Zapfest” of events, including an exhibition tracing the calligraphic evolution of 13 Zapf typefaces, sponsored by the Friends of Calligraphy in San Francisco in 2001. I highly recommend it. Also the book *Gudrun Zapf von Hesse*, with 150 colour plates, is a beautiful homage to her major contribution to the book arts as a bookbinder.

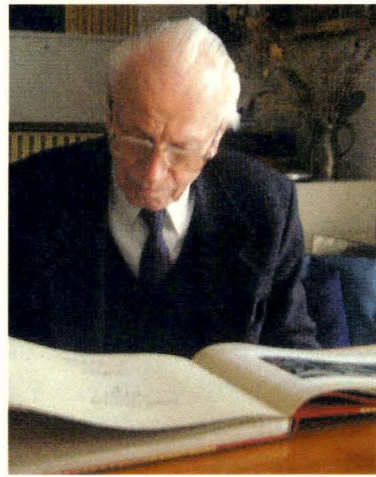
Hermann Zapf’s designs demonstrate that the skills and knowledge acquired as a calligrapher have inspired his indefatigable search for new methods and technologies for the production of type. Since 1976, when he first started to work on a project for typeface usage by the non-professional in the coming era of the personal computer, he has continued to inspire a new generation. Far from being outpaced by technology, Zapf has put it into his service as a calligrapher. His latest major design, the script family Zapfino, was the result of years of effort to create a calligraphic type free of the constraints imposed by metal type founding and photo-composition. The four Zapfino alphabets are intended to incorporate overlapping flourishes, ascenders and descenders, overcoming previous limitations. Zapfino was released in 1998, the year Hermann turned 80.



Gudrun Zapf von Hesse

Begun in 1977 and requiring monthly trips from his home base in Darmstadt, Hermann Zapf’s well-known course in English on typographic computer programs at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), School of Printing Management and Sciences, in New York, was one of many positions all over the world from which he pioneered ideas and design techniques that continually gained popularity in the field of desktop publishing. In 1987, Hermann passed on this position to a former student, Julian Waters, the well-known calligrapher and son of the eminent calligrapher Sheila Waters and the late Peter Waters, bookbinder and chief conservator at the Library of Congress from 1971 to 1995. Hermann is currently working on establishing his personal archive at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany.

Many thanks to Geoffrey Spencer for making the visit with the Zapfs possible. One of the founding members of the Alcuin Society, Geoffrey has maintained a long correspondence with the Zapfs related to Gudrun’s Alcuin typeface and other subjects of common interest. We are indebted to his generosity in offering to make the arrangements. It was a rare privilege to meet the Zapfs in their own home.



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Marlene Chan lives in Ottawa.