IN PRAISE OF BLACKLETTER

For several centuries after the invention of printing with type, blackletter scripts continued to flourish, despite a growing dominance of roman letterforms. As recently as the late 19th century, many typographers considered blackletter superior to roman. But taste, familiarity and an unfortunate connection to Fascism in the mid-20th century all but finished off blackletter. With an eye towards its role in contemporary calligraphy, Marlene Chan takes a brief look at blackletter's history.
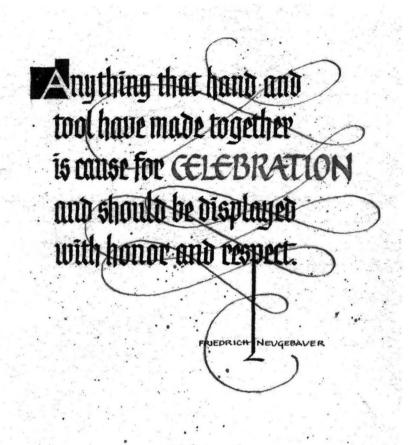
As MEMBERS OF the Alcuin Society may already know, blackletter, like roman script, evolved from the early book hand called the Carolingian minuscule, attributed to the encouragement and inspiration provided by Alcuin of York. In the interests of conserving space, time (by increasing speed) and materials, the scribes of the early 12th century may have somewhat sacrificed legibility (a subject of considerable controversy) but maintained the rhythm and flow of the writing by inventing contractions, joining letters, reducing margins and progressively condensing the white space between letters and lines while at the same time increasing the thickness and weight of strokes. The letter *i* was employed as the unit of width on which to build almost the entire minuscule alphabet. Stub endings replaced tapering strokes and by the 14th century, the terminals of many lowercase characters ended in a compact diamond.

The styles of scribes were also affected by goldsmiths, medallists and other artisans who prized economy in the production of inscriptions in stone, wood and metal. Gutenberg employed a standardized textura form of blackletter particular to his time and place in printing the Gutenberg Bible, the headings of the Mainz Indulgences (1454–55) and other liturgical works. Since the invention of printing, the term "blackletter" has come to encompass a myriad of scripts that can be roughly divided into four styles or families: textura (*gotisch*), fractur, bastarda (*schwabacher*) and rotunda (*rundgotisch*). Gothic is often misleading in reference to blackletter, for it is commonly used as an American term for sans serif type. However, calligraphers often use the word "Gothic" interchangeably with blackletter because of the similar space created by the pen strokes, which mimic the arches of Gothic architecture.

Paul Shaw and Peter Bain, editors of the monograph and exhibition catalogue *Blackletter: Type and National Identity* (1998), point out that "the opposition between blackletter and roman has historically been coloured by a complexity of stereotypes and associated polarities: medievalism vs. modernity, Protestantism vs. Catholicism, Lutheran Pietism vs. Italian Humanism, German Romanticism vs. French Enlightenment, the authority of the state vs. personal liberty and popular sovereignty, nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism, mysticism vs. rationality." This publication contains insightful essays documenting this enduring schism, a timeline linking critical historical events to key moments in the evolution of blackletter and roman type, a glossary of key concepts and a bibliography of sources.

When the extraordinary calligrapher, type designer and illustrator Rudolf Koch (1876-1934) first began teaching blackletter, or what he called *deutsche schriften* (German script), he felt a powerful emotional connection with it as a personal and independent artistic expression, evoking pride in his national identity as a German. Unfortunately, Adolf Hitler felt the same way in his early years of power, pushing the use of blackletter as the national script of Germany (*Volkschrift*) in the name of social control. But he eventually

> **Anything that hand and tool have made together is cause for CELEBRATION and should be displayed with honor and respect.**
>
> FRIEDRICH NEUGEBAUER

An original sample of blackletter script by Judith Jaimet Bainbridge.

shunned the use of blackletter (referring to it as *Judenlettern*), deciding it was interfering with the Nazi plan of world domination, and embraced roman letterforms instead. Koch, meanwhile, remained a lifelong advocate and champion of blackletter.

Remarking that many German scholars were unwilling to read roman type, Goethe's publisher and printer, Johann Friedrich Unger, recommended a simplification of the "superfluous corners" of *fraktur* in a typeface to compete with the popularity of roman type. Such a national German type would have the added advantage, he said, of reducing the overhead required to maintain sets of both roman and blackletter type.

Like Koch, a calligrapher confronting the blackletter form for its own sake today taps into individual emotion and personality, ever dependent on the mood of the moment and the meaning of the words in a contemporary context, whatever the language spoken or written. It is a process of discovery and self-discovery. In finding his own voice, Koch achieved resonance through his versatile, spontaneous, exuberant nature and inventive, experimental approach to lettering. Blackletter expressed his highest aspirations.

Marlene Chan lives in Ottawa. She was inspired to write this article while participating in a 10-week workshop on Gothic variations (traditional, Koch, Neugebauer) taught by Judith Jaimet Bainbridge, a founding member of the Ottawa Calligraphy Society with a long career as a government scribe.