FUTURA

The Typeface of our time

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Contents

| Paul Renner

1 *Typografie Als Kunst (Cover)*

Paul Friedrich August Renner (1878 – 1956) was born in Wernigerode, Prussia and spent most of his life in Germany. Renner worked as a painter, writer, teacher, book-artist and typographer and is most famous for designing the typeface Futura. Paul Renner developed Futura out of basic geometric shapes. He sought to recreate the elemental forms of classical Roman capital letters that were based on simple shapes such as the circle, square and triangle. His desire to use these pure elemental forms was also a reflection of the philosophies of the de Stijl, Constructivist, Bauhaus and The New Typography movements of the early twentieth-century. His typeface embodies the spirit of his time with its adherence to primary geometric forms, its even thickness in line weight, and a reductive approach that strips away decorative flourishes and written-hand characteristics. Renner affectionately referred to Futura as 'The typeface of our time' and indeed it remains one of the most popular and widely used typefaces. This text is a study of the relevant influences on his education, philosophies and work, and the characteristics of his typeface Futura. ● Renner received a middle-class education from the 'Gymnasium' school system, studied at several art academies during his higher education, and finished his training in Munich in 1900.[1] After completing his education in fine art, Renner

1 Christopher Burke, *Paul Renner - The Art of Typography*, 15.
(New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998)
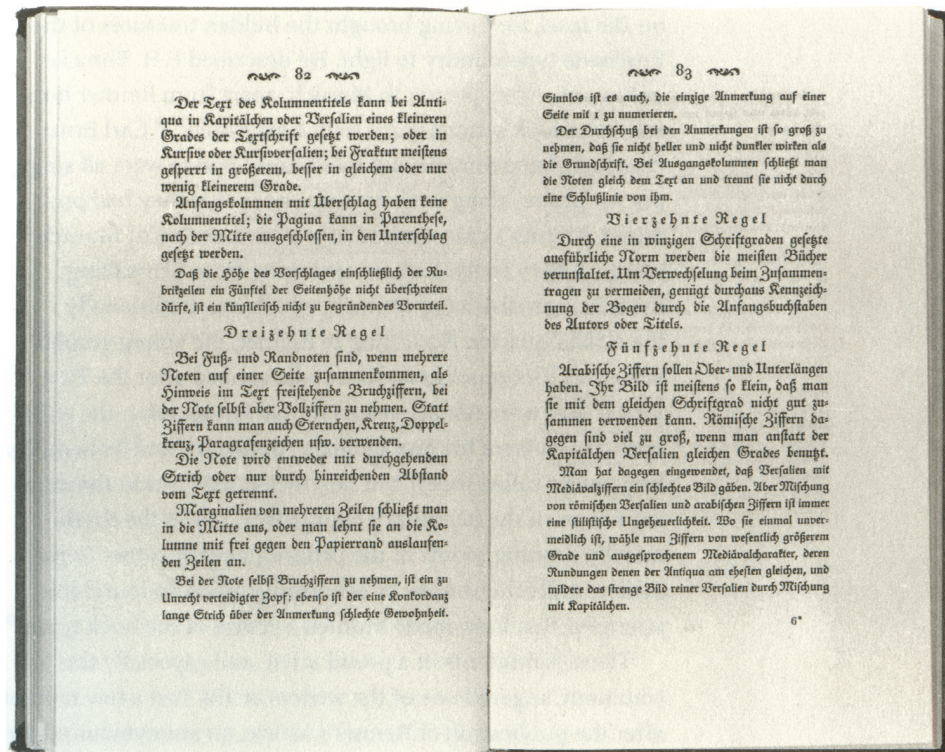
began his career as a painter in Munich, Germany. From 1906, Renner went on to study applied art at the Debschitz Schule school in Munich which featured a program for graphic arts focusing on drawing, illustration, printing, book arts and typography.[2] Renner became a member of the Deutscher Werkbund in 1910 where he began the early part of his career in the book arts, typography and teaching. The Werkbund was an important group for artists as it worked to elevate standards of design and public taste, and "unify artists and craftsmen with industry to elevate functional and aesthetic qualities of mass production, particularly in low-cost consumer products."[3] Renner's Werkbund experience provided him knowledge on composition, printing and binding in the book arts and during this time he also becamefamiliar with the printing houses, compositors and publishers of Munich. His early work with book art and typography led to his first book on typographic rules published in 1917. He continued to explore his rules on typography and book design in his book *Typografie als Kunst* (Typography as Art, 1922) (Figure 1 & 2) and published another typographic book in 1939 called *Die Kunst der Typographie* (The Art of Typography) ▲

2 Burke, 27.

3 Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design Third Edition*, 278. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.,1994.)

‖ **Blackletter Debate**

There were two debates in German design which involved a conflict between tradition and modernity. The first debate concerned typography. German speaking countries were the last countries still using 'black letter' or 'gothic' letterforms during the first half of the twentieth century. Gothic type was an important part of German tradition and culture. "Gothic type of the Fraktur variety was standard for German books and literature in the first decades of the twentieth century, and to many it was an unquestionable part of German culture."[4] Over the course of time, Gothic versus Roman type became a critical debate for Renner and other artists working in applied arts. The second, widespread debate was on technology. Those with conservative viewpoints favored traditional craft and those with modern viewpoints favored technology and the 'machine'. Renner initially started on the conservative side of the debate. During the 1920's, his views and work gradually shifted from supporting the traditions of the Gothic type and craft towards supporting the roman type, technology and modernism.[5] ■ In the 1920's after World War I there were experiments all over Europe. Nowhere were these experiments and changes more interesting in a typographical sense than in Germany. There was a great dissatisfaction with tradition and a definite turning away from the past, anything associated with the war or the defeat. New approaches and thinking were eagerly tried out. Stanley Morison noted this as the greater willingness of the German craftsman to experiment with letters, and in these experiments the sans serif letters received a full treatment.[6] ● In the debate concerning gothic letterforms versus roman letterforms, Renner was seeking readability and functionality in typographic forms and felt Futura was the appropriate style for letterforms in Germany and an alternative solution to gothic or roman.[7] Gothic typefaces had been in use throughout northern Europe, but over the course of time, the use of Roman type spread. By the twentieth century, Gothic type was almost exclusive to Germany and became synonymous with German heritage, culture and books. The Fraktur style of gothic was standard for most books, newspapers and official documentation. ▲ Renner considered both Gothic and Roman for setting type in the German language, and had doubts about the suitability and functionality of both styles. Because the German language used so many capitals, he believed that Roman was problematic with its combination of capitals derived from inscriptional forms and minuscules derived from cursive writing. He also felt that the capitals in Fraktur were highly decorative and that the forms of Fraktur had lost their root in function because they were derived from a luxury script and not from writing for everyday use.[8] With the release of Futura in 1927, Renner publicized in his writings that it was a solution to the debate over gothic versus roman type. Renner was sharing similar views on the progression of type with the Bauhaus school. Key figures like Joost Schmidt and Herbert Bayer favored sans serif type as the only true typographic expression of the modern age and dismissed Fraktur as well. Renner promoted Futura as a new form of grotesk and made it clear in his writings of the need to abolish Fraktur.[9] ■

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4 Burke, 28.
5 Burke, 18.
6 Steven Heller et al., *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, 84.(Watson Guptill Publications, 2001.)

7 Burke, 79.
8 Burke, 82.
9 Burke, 84.

⦀ Bauhaus

The styles, objectives and philosophies of the Bauhaus school were important influences on Paul Renner and the development of Futura. The Bauhaus school (Figure 4) was founded in Weimar in 1919. The schools director Walter Gropius wanted to express and expand the Modernist sensibility through the integration of art and technology and the development of a mass-production aesthetic. Gropius was an architect and made constructing and building the ultimate objective of the school's teaching structure.[10] The desire of the Bauhaus and Gropius for a new unity of art and technology was a consequence of Germany's concern for upgrading design in an industrial society that began at the beginning of the century. They wanted to improve the quality of life by making goods available for mass manufacture.[11] ●
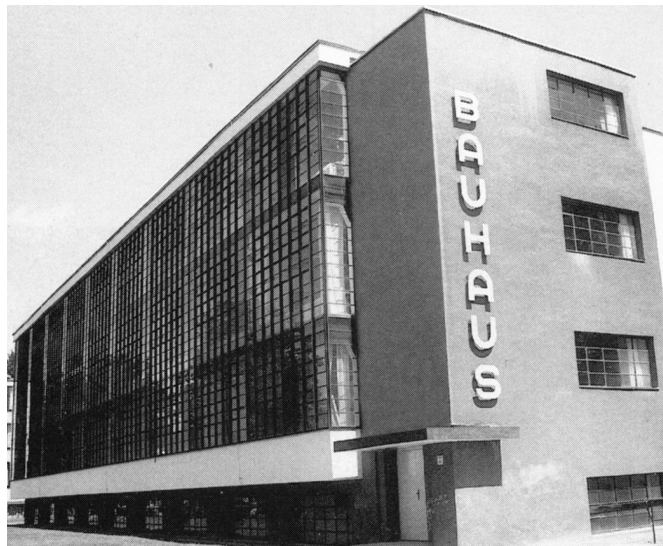
3 Bauhaus Advertisement (Left)
4 Bauhaus School

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian constructivist, was a major figure in the faculty of the Bauhaus experimenting with painting, photography, film, sculpture and graphic design. Moholy-Nagy contributed an important statement about typography, describing it as a tool of communication. He felt it should be communication in its most intense form with an emphasis on absolute clarity. He felt that legibility was important and communication should not be impaired by a prior esthetic. He advocated the use of linear directions and geometric forms and desired a new language of typography.[12] De Stijl and Constructivist artists and philosophies were an important influence on the formal principles at the Bauhaus and were applied to design problems.[13] Bauhaus designers and typographers sought the need for a standard form of writing, without the two sets of letters involved in capitals and lower case. Moholy-Nagy felt the need for a typeface with correct proportions, stripped away of individual flourishes, and that would be based on the bare functional compositions of each letter and no more. Asymmetry, rectangular fluid grids, bold abstract forms and the absence of decoration described the Bauhaus look. The Bauhaus philosophy was creating a fitness of form to function.[14] ▲

10 Lewis Blackwell, *Twentieth-Century Type*, 63.
    (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992.)
11 Meggs, 278.
12 Meggs, 279-80.
13 Meggs, 282.
14 Blackwell, 72.

5 *Bayer's Universal Alphabet*

Herbert Bayer

Herbert Bayer became a professor of the typo-graphic and graphic design workshop at the Bauhaus. The influence of Moholy-Nagy, the de Stijl and Constructivism were seen as "his work-shop made striking typographic design innovations along functional and Constructivist lines. Sans-serif fonts were used almost exclusively, and Bayer designed a universal type that reduced the alphabet to clear, simple, and rationally constructed forms." Bayer omitted the capital letters believing that the two alphabets of capitals and lower case were incompatible in design.[15] Herbert Bayer's Universal Alphabet (Figure 5) was a minimalist sans serif face that fit with the reductive approach of the Bauhaus. Bayer's single-alphabet uses forms from a declared reductive range of few angles, arcs and selected lines, resulting in simplicity. The m and ɯ are the same inverted, the x is an o cut in half and turned inside out. Van Doesburg's alphabet of 1919 and Tschichold's universal lettering were also similar in their approach. The need for a single alphabet was a popular issue for many of typographers and was based on the Bayer's belief that the upper case is not pronounced verbally, and can be seen as causing a substantial waste of time for setting type and com-plicates typographic communication.[16] ■

15 Meggs, 284.

16 Blackwell, 72.

6 Cover and page from Tschichold's
Typographische Mitteilungen

Jan Tschichold

Jan Tschichold was another artist associated with the Bauhaus school and its principles. He assimilated the new design concepts of the Bauhaus and the Russian constructivists and became a proponent of the New Typography. In the 1925 periodical he designed and edited titled *Typographische Mitteilungen, Elementare Typographie -The Principles of Design*; (Figure 6), he employed new approachs in typography and design with an asymmetrical page layout, which went against Germany's traditional style of medieval textura and symmetrical layout.[17] Tschichold's views on type design fit with the Bauhaus philosophy. He also felt that types should be elementary in form without embellishment and the sans serif with its variety of weights and proportions represented modern type. Sans-serif typefaces were the answer to modern needs as they were stripped of unessential characteristics and reduced the alphabet to its basic, elementary shapes.[18] Tschichold also believed that the essence of the new typography was clarity, and the objective was to develop form from the functions of the text.[19] ● In 1925 Renner accepted a teaching position at the Frankfurt School of Art. Renner was a full time staff member and responsible for reorganizing all levels of study in the typography

17 Meggs, 287.

18 Meggs, 288.
19 Meggs, 289.

department. This was a significant experience regarding his typeface design since the school's curriculum had been remodeled along the lines of the Bauhaus school.[20] During his tenure at the school, Renner had been redrawing Futura as a project for public signing and was stimulated by the school's socially-driven designs in the new 'functionalist' style. Renner's colleagues were rejecting historicism while embracing the New Typography and technology.[21] ▲ In 1926, Renner returned to Munich and took a post as the principal of the Munich printing trade school. Munich was a cultural and artistic center in southern Germany and the scene of much debate over tradition and conservatism versus modernism. According to Burke, this was a time when Renner's views indicate a shift away from his earlier conservatism and towards a forward looking stance. In addition to elements of the New Typography, Renner also supported the new architecture and wanted Munich to catch up with the new movement in design. Renner felt that the new architecture was a return to basics from classical tradition and provided a new unity of content and form.[22] ■ In the same year Renner invited Jan Tschichold to join his staff and teach a course in typography and calligraphy. Georg Trump was also invited to teach at the Munich school. Trump was a successful book designer also working in the style of the New Typography and had practical experience in typesetting and printing. The atmosphere of the Munich school, The Bauhaus, artists like Jan Tschichold and the New Typography were an influence on Renner's views on tradition and modernism as he "publicly expressed his view that a new style in typography and architecture must replace the prevailing history."[23] Before becoming

colleagues at the Munich school, both Renner and Tschichold had been aware of each other's works and writings. Tschichold had studied Renner's 1922 book *Typografie als Kunst* and Renner had read Tschichold's writings and rules on the New Typography in the October 1925 issue of the periodical *Typographische Mitteilungen, Elementare Typographie* by Tschichold. Both Renner and Tschichold were not completely connected to or affiliated with the Bauhaus program, but both were certainly advocates of many of the school's aims and principles and were the primary proponents of the 'New Typography'. Renner's 1931 book *Mechanisierte Grafik* (*Mechanized Graphic Design*) and Tschichold's book *Die neue Typographie* were considered two of the most important texts of the time on the New Typography. Their experience together as colleagues would have allowed for the exchange of ideas and influence. Tschichold was separate from Renner though as his writings about the New Typography showed a heavy influence from Russian writings and Constructivism. While there may have been some influence upon each others views and designs, Renner had been trained in the fine arts and in the classical tradition and was more concerned with taking a wider view of the new design and how to place it in relation to traditions of European style and thought.[24] ● Like Maholy-Nagy and Tschichold, Renner also supported the belief that types should be elementary in form, without embellishment, and thus the alphabet should be stripped of unessential elements and reduced to basic elementary shapes. He also agreed that clarity, legibility and readability were most important. Renner felt that by exposing the geometric basis of letterforms, he was revealing the funda-

20 Burke, 54.
21 Burke, 55.
22 Burke, 57.
23 Burke, 59.

24 Burke, 66.

7 Jan Tschichold's Poster Designs
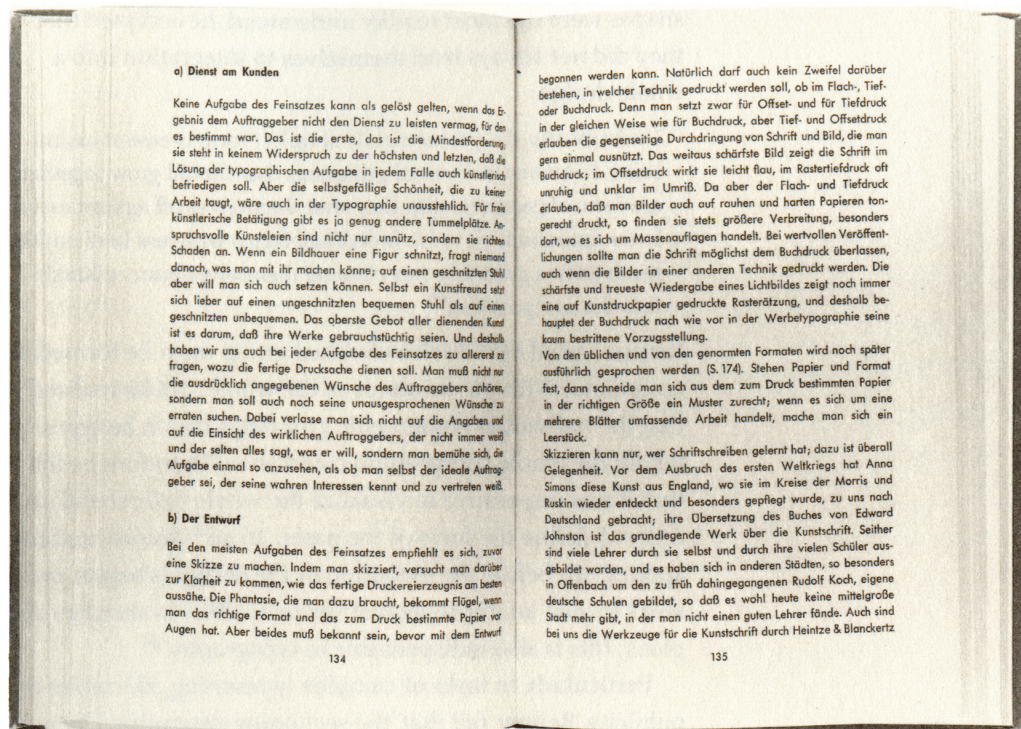
8 *Die Kunst der Typographie* (Spread)

mental features that enabled a typeface to be read.[25] In terms of readability, Tschichold realized that that the New Typography would not have much affect on book design, and Renner, having worked with book design and book arts, agreed. Renner felt that the new typography worked by reducing the isolation of individual typographic jobs. (Figure 7) Yet in contrast to Tschichold, Renner felt that the New Typography's use of asymmetry had only one cause:

> *"the principle that a design is to be condemned if it gives priority to beautiful form instead of the task at hand. Present day applied art is permeated by the attempt to do without ostentation. Not every printed document can or should be made into a work of art."* [26]

Staying with the German tradition, Renner supported symmetry in design, especially when it pertained to modest, everyday needs including basic book text and page layout. He would continue to use traditional page design as seen in a spread from his 1948 book *Die Kunst der Typographie*. (Figure 8) Renner saw the best chances for working out a really rational new typography coming from the influence of the new architecture.[27] ▲

25 Burke, 113.

26 Burke, 70.
27 Heller, 86.

Differences

A difference between Renner's philosophy and those working in the New Architecture and New Typography was that Renner was more inclined to look to the past when necessary and was not so quick to dismiss traditionalism for the sake of total adherence to modernism or radical thought. As an artist trained in classical traditions, Renner seemed to use moderation and balance in his work. Renner seemed to accept some of the new ideas and principles of the Bauhaus and the New Typography, yet he never completely rejected knowledge or traditions from the history of the arts. Renner felt the essence of modern design lay in the timeless, aesthetic aspects of design in contrast to many modernists who did not accept inheritance from the past and only supported subconsciously imagined function and forms directly derived from new technology. He believed that the eternal rules of design were based on Cezanne's statement that:

> "everything in nature models itself on the sphere, cone and cylinder; it is necessary to paint along these simple lines, then one can do what one wants." [28]

Renner's rules were an adherence to primary geometric shapes which were the simplest and most contrasting forms. Renner had started applying the concept of primary geometry to Roman capital letters since his 1922 book, *Typografie als Kunst*. He believed that the clarity of the Roman capitals was derived from their basis in simple geometric shapes and that they were the 'Ur-form', or primordial, essential form of script.[29] ■ Unlike Herbert Bayer, who designed his universal alphabet based on pure geometric forms in an ideological way, Renner designed Futura in a pragmatic way for the sake of a functional, useable typeface.[30] Like Bayer, Renner also sought pure, highly geometric forms and a reductive process of stripping down letterforms in the development of Futura. Renner also began his design with a single, lowercase alphabet following the influence of Bayer's universal alphabet and the Bauhaus philosophy. But in contrast to Bayer and the Bauhaus, Renner and the Bauer Typefoundry incorporated the forms of the classical, Roman majuscules as a basis for the capital letters. His approach evolved and this shows another primary intention of Renner which was to create a harmonious marriage of capitals and small letters, unlike Bayer who did not want two classes of the same form. Renner did go on to deny some of the influences from the Bauhaus and the new typography when he stated that

> "the typeface of our time cannot be attained by superficially aligning historical letterforms with the forms of the New Architecture."

According to Burke, Renner implied that Futura's skeletal letterforms were an inevitable consequence of modern processes of type manufacture. The difference between architecture and typography is that modern design was largely based on the New Architecture and in architecture, the materials constitute the final structure itself and it makes no sense to view it as a technological form.

> "In typography, the materials, like lead type, are the means to an end. The final product is an index, a graphic trace of the technology used to produce it." [31] ●

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28 Burke, 68.
29 Burke, 69.
30 Burke, 95.

31 Burke, 114

IV **Futura's Development**

Futura falls under the Lineal classification of typefaces. These are types without serifs known as sans, sans-serifs, or grot or grotesque from England and grotesk in Germany. There are four categories of the Lineal classification: Grotesque, Neo-grotesque, Geometric and Humanist; Futura falls under the category of Geometric. Geometrics are theoretical faces constructed on geometrical shapes, usually mono-line. The same curves and lines are used deliberately in as many letters as possible so that there is the least differentiation between letters.[32] ▲ Futura has a restful appearance when used for continuous text and, unlike other groteks that contain more compressed letterforms and heavier capitals, futura appears classical due to the form of its capitals and the open, wide forms of the geometrical small letters.[33] Even though it is geometric, it is one of the most harmonious and rhythmical sans serifs ever made. Its proportions are graceful, humane and suitable like many other sans serifs for setting extended text.[34] ■

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z
a b c d e f g h
i j k l m n o p q
r s t u v w x y z

9 Futura Book

Collaboration

One influence on Futura may have been the signing alphabet designed by Renner's colleague Ferdinand Kramer, an architect from the Frankfurt school. When Kramer arrived in Frankfurt, he was commissioned to redraw Futura for the City Planning Office as a model for public signing in the city. The sketches for the signing were called 'Kramer-Grotesk' and were similar to Futura. Renner had worked on Futura before he reached Frankfurt, but Renner and Kramer became good friends, were impressed with each other's work and it was likely that there was a free exchange of ideas between them.[35] ● Renner and

32 Ruari McLean, *The Thames and Hudson Manual of Typography*, 61-62. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1980.)
33 Burke, 109.
34 Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style Second Edition*, 241. (Point Roberts, Washington: Hartley & Marks, Publishers, 1996.)

35 Burke, 89-90.

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z
a b c d e f g h
i j k l m n o p q
r s t u v w x y z

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z
a b c d e f g h
i j k l m n o p q
r s t u v w x y z

10 Futura Light

11 Futura Bold

his former student Heinrich Jost, the artistic adviser at the Bauer typefoundry, showed the drawings for Futura to the foundry's proprietor Georg Hartmann and began a collaborative process in late 1924. Their goal was to study each version they developed in order to achieve the subtle design features that gave the appearance of true geometric letterforms.[36] The typeface was cut pantographically, rather than manually, but the collaboration and the trial and error process resulted in three years of production (Futura was developed between 1924 and 1927). Renner did not submit finished drawings to be used for the mechanical production and each

size of Futura that the typefoundry needed to cut. The Bauer typefoundry was given credit for sensitively redesigning each type-size in its original foundry version.[37] In addition to the regular or book weight of Futura released in 1927 (Figure 9), a Light and Bold Weight (Figure 10 & 11) were also released. By 1930, a semi-bold, an italic light, an italic regular, and a bold condensed set of weights were released. Renner and the typefoundry were answering the commercial demand with the supply of these variants and the immediate commercial success of Futura backed up Renner's claim that it was 'the typeface of our time' .▲

36 Burke, 89.

37 Burke, 91.

A Return To The Classics

Renner started his sketches and early designs for Futura following the reductive approach of the Bauhaus and the school's philosophical desire for a standard form of writing. Bayer's universal alphabet with its single set of lowercase letters as well as the geometric forms seen in the Ludwig & Mayer foundry's typeface Erbar designed by Jakob Erbar were a starting point. But Renner, in collaboration with the Bauer typefoundry took the design a step further by using the forms of the classical, Roman inscriptional majuscules as a basis for the capital letters. Thus Futura's capitals were based on near perfect circles, rectangles and isosceles triangles. Many of Futura's capitals, unlike other sans-serif typefaces, display characteristics of Roman capitals such as the B with it's slightly larger bottom bowl or the 'splayed M'. Renner was creating something new with the grotesk form of type since it did not usually rely on classical rhythm in its capitals. Renner wanted to reproduce the Roman capitals with a line of even thickness. According to Burke, Renner's earliest published writings indicated that he praised the elemental form of classical capitals which were based on simple shapes such as the circle, square and triangle. Renner applied 'Ur-form' to those capitals which meant that he removed their stroke contrast.[38] The end result was a typeface displaying capitals with classic proportions and lower case lettersbased on mostly traditional minuscule patterns.

> *"The capitals are not even widths and the lower-case are far from a picket-fence proportion in respect to spacing and arrangement. Superfically viewed, the strokes are all the same width."*

The text on a page presents a neutral effect; even in tone and texture.[39] ∎

Handwritten Traces

One important purpose for Renner while developing Futura was removing the characteristics of handwriting from a typeface. In Renner's change of view from the traditions of craft to technology and modernism, he felt it was inappropriate to transplant the forms of the handcraft on to machine-made products since the machine forms lack the trace of the human hand and therefore the product should be plain and have no presence of the hand-crafted. He felt that with modernism, German society (along with others) had changed and that the change had to be accepted.[40] According to Burke,

> *"In his published statements during the design and production of Futura, Renner clearly expressed his desire to suppress any visible reference to the calligraphic heritage of small letters, and to bring them under the influence of the static form that governed capitals."* [41]

Renner was seeking to create small letters that were similar in their energy to the capitals in order to produce a typeface attuned to the modern, technological age. According to Burke, Renner's correspondence with the Bauer typefoundry in 1940 reflected his decisions over the small letters. Renner stated that when designing Futura, "everything followed from the desire to carry the strict geometric structure of the capitals into the small letters." Renner stated that he wished to remove from the small letters the qualities that derive from forms developed from writing as well. He distanced futura to typefaces that have characteristics derived from handwriting.[42] ● In 1913, Renner originally felt that the reproduction of the handwritten gesture should be executed faithfully. But by the 1920's and on, his statements called for the opposite by removing any trace of the hand written, which shows the

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38 Burke, 96.
39 Heller, 40.

40 Burke, 66.
41 Burke, 96.
42 Burke, 96-97.

influence of modernism and technology on his philosophy. Renner stated that:

> *"Our printing type is not the expression of a movement like hand-writing; everything derived from a left-to-right dynamic, all thicks and thins, which only entered into script with the quill, make no sense in printing type."*[43]

The views of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus can been seen as an influence on Renner's change of view. In 1923, Moholy-Nagy stated in his manifesto that, "Clarity is the essence of modern printing in contrast to ancient picture writing. A new typographic language must be created, combining variety and a fresh approach to the materials of printing, a language whose logic depends on the appropriate application of the processes of printing."[44] He also stated that there was no longer any valid reason why types should always resemble the early models, which were based on broad-pen writing and produced by hand-cut punches. Types were reading symbols and we were gradually leaving the older conception of written symbols behind.

> *"Therefore, a new and beautiful type style was only possible through the direct and functional use of all our present mechanical equipment for producing type."*[45] ▲

Renner reinforced his goals of creating a unified set of geometric forms in Futura when concern arose over the removal of the cursive features, such as the curl on the bottom of the lower case t. Renner believed that because the letters were constructed on geometric principles, there should be a theme of similarity between letters. As stated by Burke, Renner was

> *"dealing with the balance of shapes within and between letters as much as with the bodily parts of letters themselves."* [46] ■
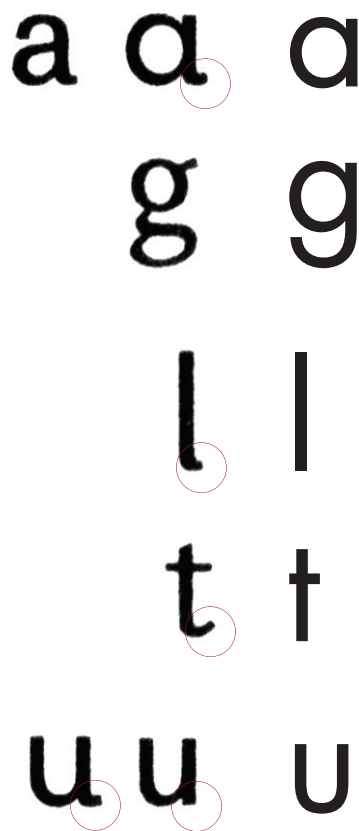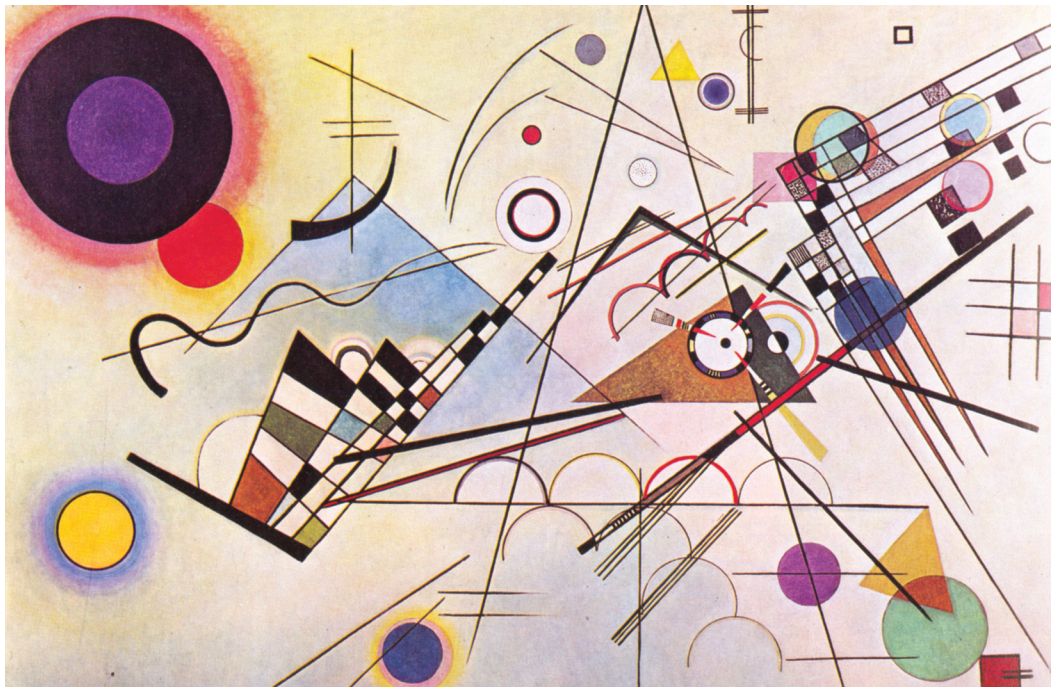

12 Futura features a single storey a and g and a removal of hand-wrritten or cursive qualities.

43 Burke, 97.
44 Blackwell, 64.
45 Heller, 86.
46 Burke, 98.

13 Kandinsky's *Composition VIII*

In The Spirit of His Time

Another purpose for creating Futura was Renner's desire to capture the 'zeitgeist' or the spirit of his time. He shared some of the ideals of the Bauhaus designers in wanting to abstract forms to their simplest elements. He wished to universalize and rid the design of any intrusive personal or local character. Both Renner and the Bauer typefoundry felt it was important for the success of Futura to stress the impersonality. They felt that the stripped-down forms suited the needs Germany's reconstructed, industrialized landscape in the 1920's and that this would help associate the typeface with the 'style of the era'.[47] This seems to fit in with Renner's philosophy on designing within your own time and culture. Renner disliked period typography. He stated that

"The print shop is not a costume shop. It is not our task to clothe each literary-content in a period costume; we must see to it that it receives a garment that suits the style of our time. We want a living typography, not a typographic theatre or masquerade."[48]
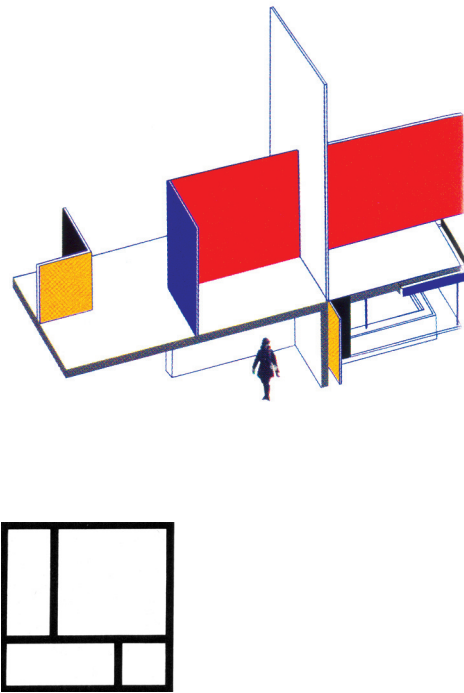
Renner believed that designers should not merely preserve their inheritance and pass it on to generation should try to solve inherited problems and cre-

47 Burke, 112.
48 Heller, 86.
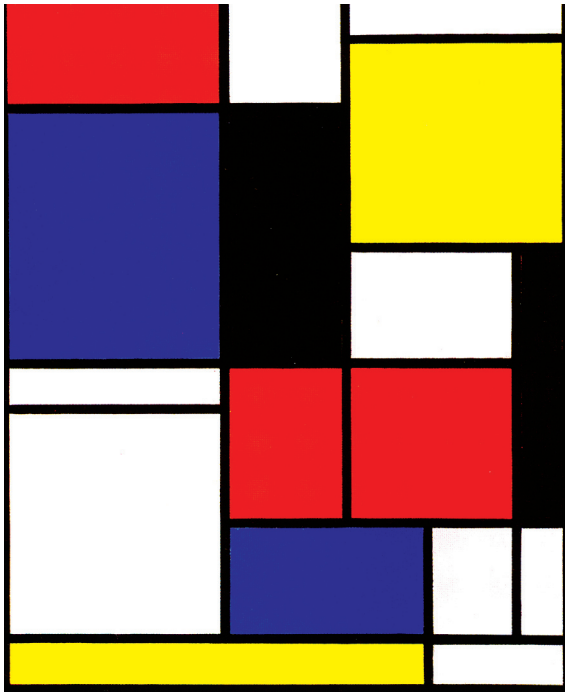
14 Piet Mondrian's *Tableau II*

15 Herbert Bayer's Symbol Design and Model

ate a contemporary form true to its own time.[49] ●
Renner believed in working within the spirit of his
time and the reduced, simple structures and geo-
metric forms were characteristics seen in his work
and the work of other Bauhaus artists. Outside of
design and typography, other artists also captured
this spirit such as Vasily Kandinsky, who was an
artist influenced by the Russian Suprematism and
Constructivism movements as well as The Bauhaus
school. Kandinsky's work evolved from being
based on colors and free expressionism to being
based on forms of geometric abstraction. (Figure

13) Piet Mondrian was another painter who
worked with a variety of styles such as cubism,
abstraction and the de Stijl. Mondrian sought to
express his theories and spiritual thoughts through
inward, abstract expression. But the form his paint-
ings (Figure 14) took with their dynamic, some-
times asymmetrical vertical and horizontal struc-
tures and the use of simple square and rectangle
shapes fits with the visual characteristics seen in the
Bauhaus (Figure 15) and the New Typography. ▲

49 Meggs, 291.

V Futura's Characteristics

Compromise was inevitable during the development of Futura. Paul Renner made compromises and changes in order to ensure the readability, functionality and commercial success of the typeface. Renner's collaboration with the Bauer typefoundry resulted in a new thought that pure geometry would not result in constructed forms. In Renner's original forms, the combination of a perfect concentric circle and a stem resulted in a p that was not correct visually when perceived by the reader. It was believed that the circle appeared wider than it should, the horizontal parts seemed thicker and less curved, flecks arise from the junction of the curve and stem, and the stem appears to rise above the vertex of the circle. (Figure 16) It was concluded that a constructive script visually cannot be created with elemental geometric construction.[50] All of the rounded forms in the lowercase and uppercase letters follow this approach by rising above or below corresponding stems as well as the baseline and mean-line. The strokes of these bowls display a slightly thinner line weight near their corresponding stems. Therefore the line weight is not perfectly even throughout and these rounded shapes are not pure geometric circles. The compromise is evidence of Renner's adherence to the functionality and readability of text. ■ Other changes include the fact that the original designs for Futura contained text figures and several highly geometric and alternate characters which have never been issued in metal and only in digital form in 1994.[51] Renner stated that these original small letters were created by an excess of geometrical construction and his goal had been to align the form of the small letters with the capitals, and thus he had no specific model to follow.

"His initial designs for a, e, g, n, m, and r (Figure 17) all display the attempt to contort conventional forms into a geometric straight-jacket."[52]

The Bauer typefoundry had decided to go with more conventional forms of the small letters and chose not to release the alternative small letters or the non-ranging figures in order to ensure the commercial success of the typeface.[53] Renner continued to use the forms, including the n, m and the 'ball and stick' form r, as seen in his book Mechanisierte Grafik. Eventually he felt that by abandoning the written quality completely in the alternative characters by using elemental geometric forms had resulted in unacceptable letterforms.[54] The typefoundry and Renner sacrificed the innovative and constructive forms for the traditional forms of European script in order to preserve readability and functionality of the letterforms. Renner described the artfulness and subtle visual adjustments required to create letters that seemed purely geometric.

"The internal logic of Futura stemmed from Renner's characteristic pursuit of a middle way - a fusion of classical proportions with the prevailing taste for geometric simplicity; its forms are not derived from modern technology, rather expressive of a notional modernity. Futura was a triumph of craft in alliance with industry – a design full of subtle and necessary inconsistencies." [55] ●

16 Comparison of letters with Rounded forms

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50 Burke, 100.
51 Bringhurst, 133.

52 Burke, 100.
53 Burke, 103.
54 Burke, 104.
55 Burke, 114.

17 Renner's Original Designs

The German language also played a crucial role in the development of the Futura letterforms. Renner was designing the typeface in Germany and therefore considered the particular needs of the German language and he ultimately described Futura as a German typeface. In the design of Futura, he created the capital C and lower case c with vertically-cut stroke endings, so that they could be closely pared spacially to certain letters. In German the letters H or K often follow the letter C and the vertical-cut of the stroke ending on Futura allows for a comfortable paring of Ch and Ck (Figure 16). A wide C would create internal space, making a gap in the word-shape.[56] ▲ Another distinctive characteristic of Futura is the height of the ascenders compared with the height of the capital letters and the cap line. Renner made the ascenders slightly taller than the capitals in response to humanistic script with the purpose of reducing the overall visual weight of the capitals in text. He felt that this had already been an advantage for some roman typefaces in other languages and that it was even more important for typesetting in the German language because of the high number of capital letters used.[57] Futura shares some characteristics of trends in German typography. The German typefaces abolished the opera glass g with its closed loop as found in the typeface Gill Sans and preferred an open tail g. The tail of the R was usually curved in English types but was straightened in German types. The straightened tail of the upper case R is a distinctive characteristic of Futura as well. ■ Futura shares some other characteristics which seem to be a trend in the typeface designs of the 1920's. Futura along with Erbar designed by Jakob Erbar, Kabel designed by Rudolf Koch and

56 Burke, 105.
57 Burke, 106-107.

Bayer's Universal Alphabet used the circular O as a proportional norm. All, except for Bayer's Alphabet, straightened the tail of the y. Futura went the furthest in terms of geometrical purity with its single storey a.[58] ● Some other characteristics of Futura are the circles used for dotting the lower case j and i. (Figure 18) The upper case Q (Figure 18) features a straight tail which starts inside the bowl. The lower case j also lacks a tail. The apex of certain capital letters such as A, M, N, V and W (Figure 18) feature sharp points as opposed to the flat, level characteristics on the apex of some other sans serif typefaces like Helvetica, Univers or Akzidenz Grotesk. ▲

Ch ck g R ji qp Qy Aa g A M N V W

18 Characteristics displaying distinct characteristics of Futura

Contemporary Use

The success of Futura was seen in the few years after it was released in 1927. Futura Black, a stencil-form display face was released in 1929 and a semi-bold, italic or oblique version of Light and Regular, and a Bold Condensed variant were released in 1930. Renner noticed the demand from compositors for the italic version and from those in advertising who requested the Bold Condensed. Futura Buchschrift was a weight created for book setting by Mager and Halbfett in 1932. Renner felt that modern sans serif typefaces were internally unified and had well differentiated contrasts making them applicable to the needs of modern typogra-

58 Sebastian Carter, *Twentieth Century Type Designers*, 124. (Aldershot, Hampshire England: Lund Humphries, 2002.)

59 Burke, 108.
60 Bringhurst, 202.

19 Swiss Air

20 Volkswagen

phy. According to Burke,

> *"He felt that the even color distribution achieved by Futura in text made it most appropriate for combining with photography, and therefore an essential building brick of the New Typography."*[59] ■

The success and popularity of Futura continued as Sol Hess at the Lanston Monotype made a copy of the typeface in 1937 and called it Twentieth Century. ATF Linotype made a copy of the typeface in 1939 and called it Spartan. David Quay and Freda Sack at the Foundry, London made a digital translation of Renner's original designs in 1993. They based the typeface on the earliest version of

21 Discover Credit Cards

Renner's designs, going back to his original alternative characters before they were sacrificed for more conventional forms, and called the typeface Architype Renner.[60] Renner stated that his claim that Futura was 'the typeface of our time' was justified by its world-wide success. After World War II, Heinrich Jost of the Bauer typefoundry reported to Renner that Futura was still the most requested typeface, at times selling for five thousand marks per day. ●The typeface saw a revival in the 1980's as well, and many businesses have used it for their logos and corporate identity including Swiss Airlines (Figure 19), Discover Credit Cards (Figure 21), Dominos Pizza (Figure 22), Bed Bath & Beyond and Earthlink. Best Buy, Shell Gas and Hewlett-Packard use Futura, not in their logos, but in the text for their products, signage, and for their print, web and television advertisments. One of the most famous uses of Futura is by Volkswagon. The sharp VW (Figure 20) letterforms and Futura have been a part of their logo, corporate identity, and advertising text since the company's inception. ▲ Paul Renner developed Futura out of basic geometric shapes. He sought to recreate the elemental forms of classical Roman capital letters that were based on simple shapes such as the circle, square and triangle. His desire to use these pure elemental forms was also a reflection of the philosophies of the de Stijl, Constructivist, Bauhaus and The New Typography movements of the early twentieth-century. His typeface embodies the spirit of his time with its adherence to primary geometric forms, its even thickness in line weight, and a reductive approach that strips away decorative flourishes and characteristics of the written-hand. Renner affectionately referred to Futura as 'The typeface of our time' and indeed it has remained one of the most popular and widely used typefaces. ■

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Colophon

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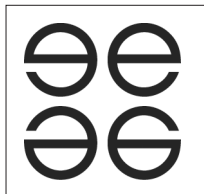
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