

John Dreyfus (1918–2002)

John Smith

John Dreyfus, who died aged 84 on December 29 2002, helped to sustain and develop the aesthetics of the printed page through more major technical changes than had occurred in the previous four hundred years. Of Franco-Swiss descent, he brought perceptive scholarship and discriminating taste to the whole spectrum of typography in the latter half of the twentieth century.

After Trinity College, Cambridge, he joined Cambridge University Press as a graduate trainee and, in 1940, helped Brooke Crutchley mount an exhibition exploring the impact of printing on civilisation. Curtailed by war, this foreshadowed the seminal 'Printing and the Mind of Man' exhibition of 1963 (held at Olympia, London), which Dreyfus helped plan; he also designed both the catalogue and the commemorative book. After war service in the Ambulance and Education Corps he returned to CUP, becoming Assistant Director from 1949 to 1955 and remaining its typographic advisor after he succeeded Stanley Morison at the Monotype Corporation. There, he oversaw the transcription of many established hot-metal faces (where type is cast and set) to film-setting, having to fight the wayward spacing, exposure and focus of the ill-conceived Monophoto machine. This sought to utilise existing keyboards by replacing the melting pot, mould and die-case of the caster with light source, sensitive paper and multiple negative-carrier, and eventually went the way of all such parsimonious compromises. The inadequacy of the Monophoto fatally weakened the firm but clearly helped keep letterpress alive with the more discriminatory printers and publishers. The range of classic faces initiated or revived by Morison and translated for planographic printing (any printing processes with no relief) under Dreyfus's direction, plus those commissioned by him, enabled the name Monotype to survive into the era of digital page description.

Jan van Krimpen's¹ annoyance at the distortions imposed on his finely drawn *Spectrum* by the Monotype technicians alerted Dreyfus to the ludicrous practice of commissioning new faces from designers without explaining the constraints of the Monotype diecase. Thereafter he made sure, by briefing his designers properly, that insensitive

modifications to make letters fit would no longer happen. Perceiving the need for an equivalent of *Helvetica* to satisfy the 1950's 'Swiss Graphics' cult, he negotiated with Deberny et Peignot² for the rights to have Adrian Frutiger adapt his then new foundry type, *Univers*, for hot-metal and photo-setting. This involved the most thorough process of type design to date: each junction between strokes was carefully considered in relation to the conflicting demands of two entirely different technologies of forming and printing the resultant characters. A measure of their success is that, although released in the penultimate decade of letterpress dominance, *9D/10pt Univers 689* quickly became the seventh best-selling Monotype matrix set of all time. The continued production of punches, matrices and spares for the surviving keyboards and casters, left in the hands of Duncan Avery, can be seen as a legacy of Dreyfus sensitively shepherding the old and new technologies in parallel through 20 years of transition. Frutiger's *Apollo*, the first face commissioned solely for Monophoto, preceded the last new Monotype hot-metal face, Tschichold's *Sabon*, by four years.

Co-founder and first president of the Association Typographique Internationale, past president of the Double Crown Club and the Printing Historical Society, he organised the 1976 Caxton Conference, was awarded the Goudy Prize in 1984 and the Gutenberg Prize in 1996. He designed a number of Fine Press books including several for the Limited Edition Club, for which he was European representative between 1956 and 1977, and a number for CUP.

Dreyfus will perhaps be most widely remembered for his writing in which he investigated and celebrated the evolution of type, the importance of its spacing and the contribution to creative design made by the Private Presses. He wrote and designed two of the Cambridge Christmas Books – those on Baskerville's Punches and Edward Johnston's Italic Type for the Cranach Press. His essays were published in *Fine Print*, *Matrix*, *Penrose Annual*, *Signature*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and many other periodicals, a selection being published by the British Library as *Into Print* in 1994. Major books include those on van Krimpen, The Nonesuch Press, and Eric Gill's type and engravings for the Golden Cockerel edition of *The Four Gospels*.

This obituary first appeared in *Parenthesis* 8 (June 2003).

1 Dutch designer Jan van Krimpen was one of the leading designers of classic bookfaces of the twentieth century.

2 Deberny et Peignot were a French type foundry who produced classic bookfaces and avant-garde advertising typefaces.