



Beauty, Form and Function in Typography

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Introducing students to the concept of beauty in Typography.

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Abstract:

“Everyone chooses his love out of the objects according to his own taste”- Plato`

This paper is an attempt to discuss about introducing the concept of beauty in Typography to the students of design to develop their typographic sensitivity. The subtle choices a student makes to design anything are the result of his learning. As designers we are aware of our surroundings, things make a lot of sense to us as we always try to find meaning out of everything that we come across. Typography is one such thing that we are surrounded with, in today’s world. Typography being an integral part of Graphic Design, can shape and influence the way we look and perceive imagery around us. We tend to love some fonts and some we discard totally. Our likes and dislikes are partially dependent on our feelings which are influenced by our prior knowledge of things, our lifestyle and our culture. The notorious comic sans or the war between Arial and Helvetica prove this statement.

Key words: Typography, pedagogy, layout, space, tactile learning, beautiful typography, form, function, basics.

1. Introduction

Typography always had the responsibility of serving a task it was given and the task being that of legibility and being invisible. In the essay 'The crystal Goblet' Beatrice Warde states that, printing should be invisible.

“Now the man who first chose glass instead of clay or metal to hold his wine was a ‘modernist’ in the sense in which I am going to use that term. That is, the first he asked of this particular object was not ‘how it should look?’ but ‘what it must do?’ and to that extent all good typography is modernist.”(Warde, October 7, 1930)

Warde uses the crystal goblet as a metaphor and states that the vessel that is the printed word should give no obstruction to the presentation of its content, the text. She poses a choice between two wine glasses: one of solid gold and one of crystal clear glass. So typography just becomes a carrier of the message. Content is a primary and typography should be passive and subordinate. Yet it is important partner in this relationship to understand language of form. There should be a balance between content and form.

Typographic form consists of letters, typefaces, words, logotypes, lettering etc. But what makes something beautiful? And if beauty can be relevant to typography, if yes then in what sense? Man has always been attracted towards beauty because from beauty, he derives a temporary joyous relief from the difficulties of his life. The term ‘Aesthetics’ means pertaining to the beautiful. The term beauty has a reference to the object, it is the sum total of all its features. The feeling of delight that is created in our mind is the only thing that might describe beauty. Beauty in visual art requires sense of sight. Seeing establishes our place in the surrounding world. Our seeing is influenced by what we know and what we believe in. Thus, the nature of beauty is not universal.

“When an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art. Assumptions concerning: Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste, etc.” (Berger, 25 September 2008)

If beauty has topped the list of how we see an object of art then it must be very important. But it is very difficult to define what is it and how it actually works as it is related to our feelings. It is not the only source of pleasure but the pleasure of beautiful is

unique and different from anything else in this world. An emotion cannot be described in words, feeling an emotion is the most effective way of understanding it.

Letterforms are the fundamental components of all typographic communication. The alphabet represents spoken sound. The contemporary forms of letters are forged from a typographic evolution. It evolved from handwriting and that is why the primary element that constructs each letterform is a linear stroke. The typographic syntax is the process of arranging elements into a cohesive whole. It includes the study of its most basic unit the letter, its combination to make a word. Words combine to make a sentence, paragraphs so on and so forth.

The students of B.F.A Applied Art learn Typography from first year. The assignments discussed here are from the second year (Batches: 2017-18 & 2018-19). The assignments are designed to help develop sensitivity towards typography in the students mind. There are various ways through which I attempt to introduce the concept of beauty of Typography to my students.

1.1 Beauty of a letter: The intrinsic character of the individual letter describes it. The well-drawn form of the letter exhibits subtlety and precision, it distinguishes one letter from the other. A perfect font size, a good font, placed on a perfect page makes the design beautiful and the experience of reading more pleasurable. But it all starts with a single letter.

Often the Applied Art course is criticized for emphasizing too much on doing those things with hand which can be easily done with the help of a computer. My take of this is, when you touch something you can feel the intensity more. The way your hand moves on paper with pencil to define a form first and draws it on paper has a coordination of mind, eyes, breathing and hand. This practical learning makes a student aware of his tools and space. Also, his own relation to his tools and space is explored. Understanding the smoothness of a form and the way it is placed on the background, defines the character of a letter. A beautiful negative space makes a beautiful positive space. The figure ground relationship creates tension as well as proximity. This assignment explores the possibility of a letter to convey a meaning by suggestion. The incompleteness of a letter in this case creates interest as well as it gives a pleasure to the viewer when he finally figures out the letter. The letter is completed in the mind of the spectator. When the letters are blown up and drawn with hand, give a better clarity of form to the students. It is a kind of paradox that we derive pleasure from incomplete and learn about the completeness of the form.

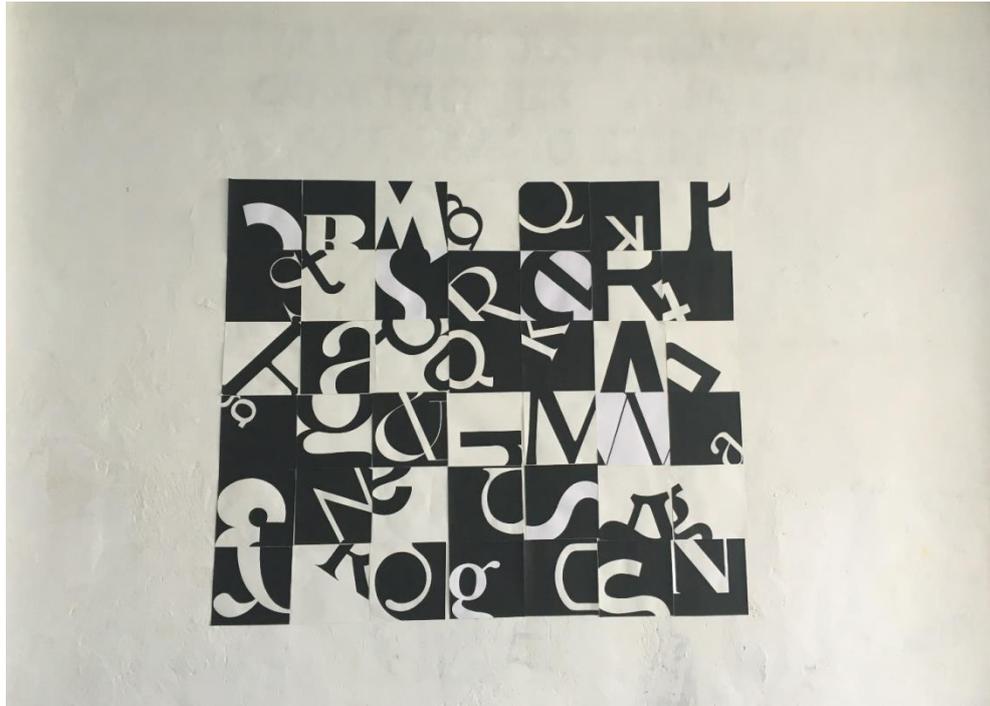


Figure.1: Study of the positive and negative parts of a letter.

1.2 Beauty of a word: A single letter might not mean anything specific unless it is a logo or monogram, but when letters combine to become a word they create meaning. And if we choose to express the meaning of the word typographically the word can become an illustration of its own content. There are many methods of designing with type but broadly we can classify it into two groups- objective & subjective representation. Objective representation is practical and straight forward. Here the students learn optical spacing and its role to put the word/ a line and a chunk of text on a given paper size. It need not express itself. They learned about aptly choosing a font which is well designed (readable, good contrast, clean counters, and smooth shape). They learned a clear, ordered representation of information that is shared in a direct efficient manner. The importance is placed on a clear message. It does not intend to play any emotional impact on the viewer.

It all starts with the trial and error method of tracing and retracing till the student gets a good solution. Since all the exercises are done manually the process is painstaking and many times boring for the students. But displaying all the assignments in class and letting the students figure out their own mistakes makes it an interesting learning process. The end result of the whole process is getting to learn that a word should be read smoothly by the reader. Letter spacing, tracking, word spacing should be perfect. And the whole struggle is to understand, ‘what is perfect?’ whilst there is no way anyone

really can tell until he tries different things. A seasoned eye can distinguish between good and bad spacing. But for the most part, there is the part of the design process where the students just has to try many different approaches. Beauty lies in details. One must understand what bad typography is. It wouldn't be wrong if one says not being sensitive towards letters and the spacing can lead to bad typography.

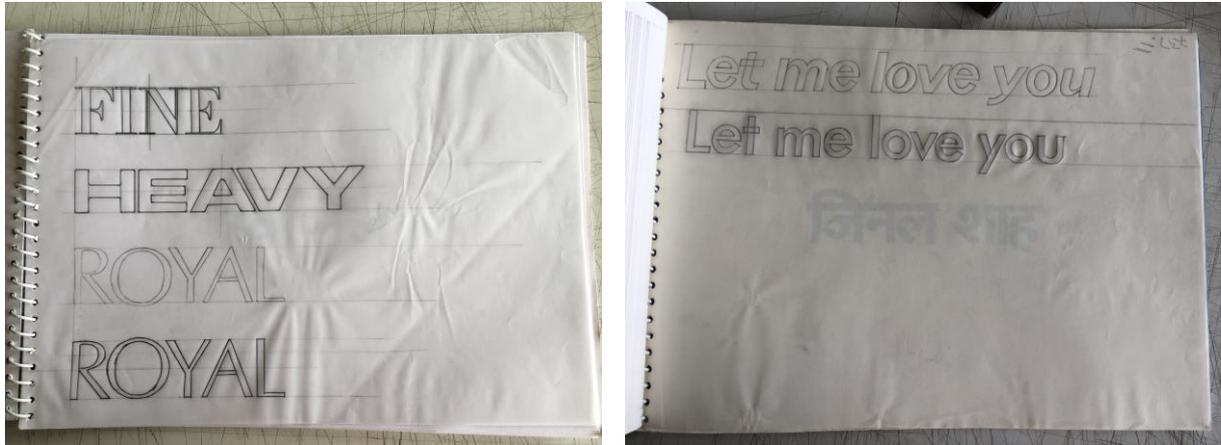


Figure.2: Tracing to understand optical spacing.

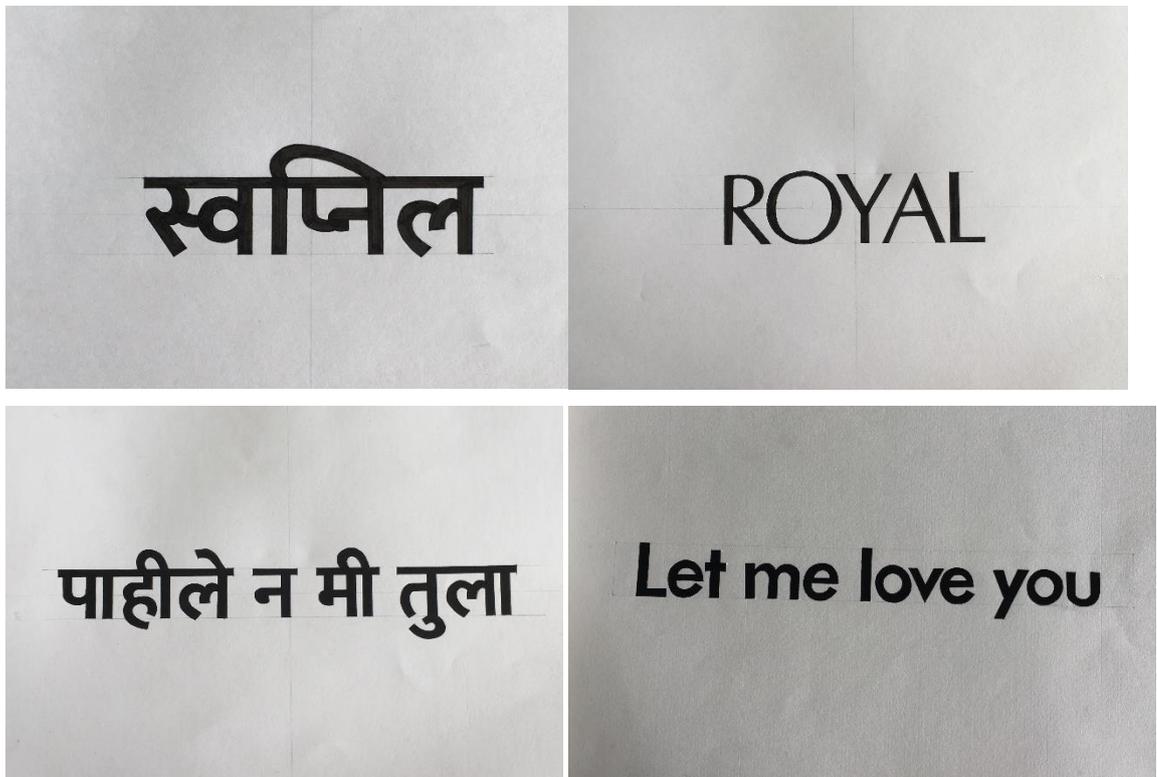


Figure.3: Study of letter and word spacing

1.3 Choosing a font: Over the years we have seen typography changing according to the needs of that era. The evolution of international styles and conventions, and the development of criteria and traditions of taste by which typographers improve their work. As the result, it is fairly certain that in a little more than 500 years of printing history since Gutenberg, at thousands of typefaces have been designed. The students have a multiplicity of types to choose from and that is a very difficult task for them. Students often come with a 'Typolog' (a type specimen book) and ask which font to use? The answer is simple, whichever font suits the context of the matter choose that font. Now, there is a problem again because every font has its specific character. Every font also has some built in characteristics and a visual language. So, the students must learn to talk to the font and understand what it says between the lines. Typefaces have personalities- cold, sophisticated, wild or friendly- which helps to establish the attitude of the design. They provide an immediate first impression that is critical to the delivery of the message. Once the student understands the language of fonts they can choose easily.

Bold Attitude

Figure.4: Every font has a personality.

Letterforms carry emotional and aesthetic information that has an impact on how the verbal message is read; and they play a part in the design itself. We all possess a subtle vocabulary of style that compels us to read a composition involving letterforms on many levels. Subjective representation is conceptual interpretation. It is used on a theme or an idea that creates an experience for the viewer. It allows a greater scope for complexity and simplicity as well. It plays on a multiple layers of interpretation for the implied meaning of the design. It has an impact on the emotions of the viewer. In some cases the perfect expression makes beautiful typography.

The emotional impact of letterforms is communicated before their literal content, and therefore when the students understand a link between the precise feelings and typography that he wishes his design to communicate, he is able to execute it well too. The student's job is to find the correct visual language which will communicate in a

precise way. Once this concept is clear language is not a barrier, but it gives a greater scope for exploring ideas through typography.

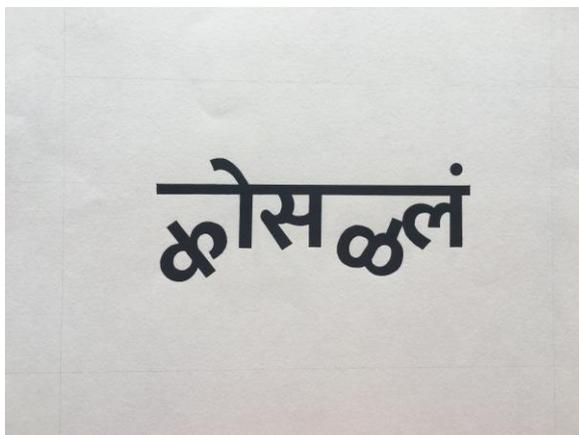
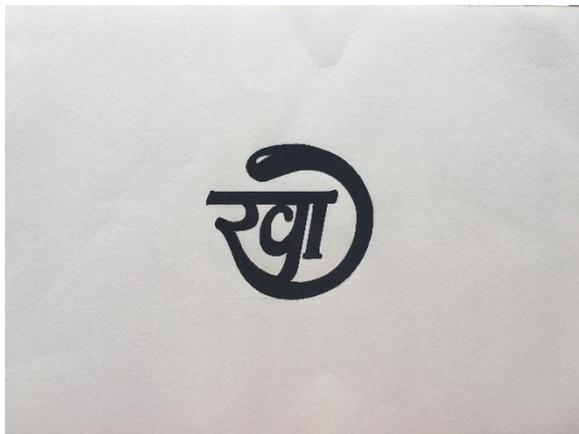
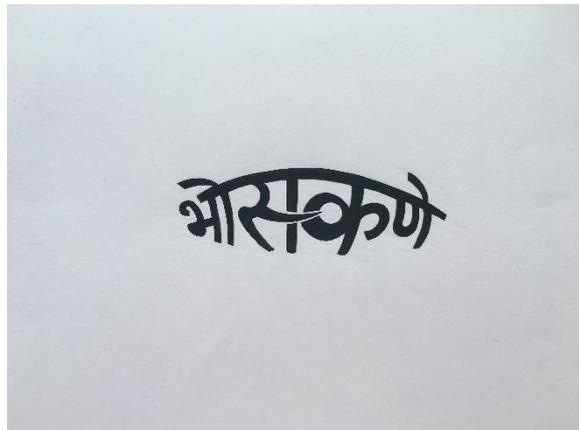
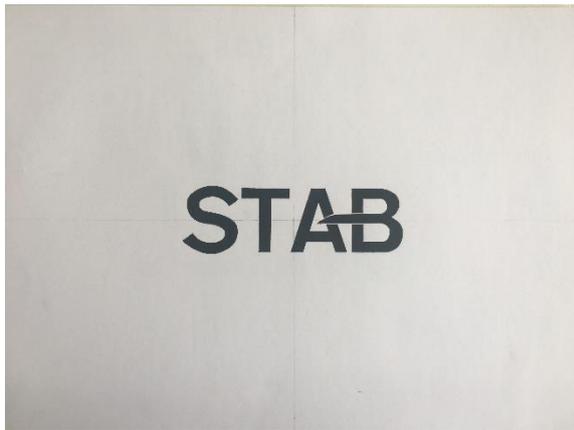


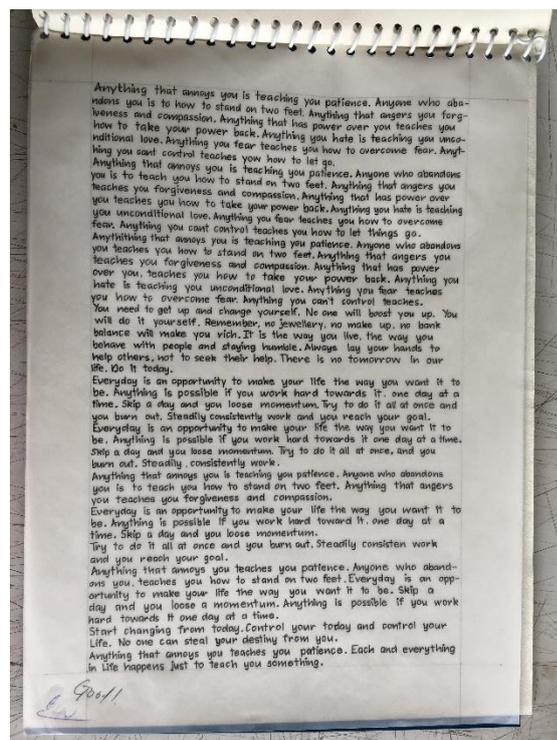
Figure.5: Typography as an image

When a reader looks upon a beautifully designed page, he is drawn, almost without even thinking about it, to read the words. He takes them in, unfolding the

narrative in his mind, and he asks questions about the text, the author, the book itself. This engagement, this interplay between the reader and the words, is beautiful interaction design. An intelligent, caring typographer carefully chooses typefaces, line lengths, margins, etc. that allow the user to enter a conversation with the writer, to engage with the words before him. It is not merely good usability or legibility that the typographer creates; it is an experience. It is a dialogue. It is a co-creative narrative as it makes all other elements work together for a common cause.

A decisive well planned typographic system encourages readability and understanding, type is the leading factor that controls the activity of a page and enables sequential flow. Nurturing order and structural harmony typography aesthetically combines text with meaning. It must invite the reader into the text so that the reader can quickly scan through the text. It must clarify the structure and the order of the text to engage the reader. Typographic hierarchy decides the structure of a page. Typography unifies the design through its complementing and contrasting positioning with all other visual elements. It must relax the reader.

When the student draws margins, guidelines and write with Futura 10 points to fill the whole page with text, he learns to measure the leading space. He also has to understand how to avoid the overlapping of ascenders and descenders, avoid rivers, orphans, widows and make a beautiful page, that when looked at with half closed eyes gives a soothing experience to the reader.



6. Conclusions

Developing sensitivity towards Typography in a students' mind is a lengthy process. By learning the basics thoroughly one can achieve typographic perfection. The hands on experience with the traditional tools and materials like pencil, paper, brushes, tracing papers, rulers, pens and inks etc. gives the student a learning experience that enhances his skills as well as his understanding of form. The importance of tactile learning in a child's growth has long been proved by scientists. When students start learning something new tactile learning adds to the process in a positive way. Various exercises help the student understand the importance of spacing and other important aspects of type.

So, type that is perfect is beautiful. Typography that does justice to the context of the text is also beautiful. For a specific purpose if typography is invisible it is still beautiful because its transparency only highlights its importance: without it, this delicate relationship between reader and writer would be lost. And for a certain reason if it shouts, it indeed can be beautiful, as long as it serves its purpose.

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