

JOHN STEVENS

ARTIST OF THE WRITTEN WORD

Artist of the Written Word



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By Denis Brown

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## Moving Contours &

### Plastic Lines | *Tendencies toward grace & fluidity*

The brush is the first lettering tool I learned to use, beginning as a signwriter apprentice under Anthony Perner of Long Island, New York. Besides exposing me to the workings of the broad brush and clever sign techniques, he encouraged me to “keep going,” and he was a great friend. However, classical forms were not part of my early training; they

world and history of letter artists, unknown to the signwriters of New York. It was an unusual interest in my neighborhood; I can tell entertaining stories of people warning me that there were no calligraphy jobs.

Since I was a child, I followed my interests. Art and music were at the top of the list. I was interested in every kind of lettering and typography, looking at



were something I studied on my own, as my interest in calligraphic and typographic letterforms grew.

I worked mostly from books. As I studied, I became interested in letterform design and type as well. In my quest for better understanding and more beautiful forms, I found Eric Gill, Hermann Zapf, and Father Edward Catich. I also found John Howard Benson and eventually the whole

everything and anything. Calligraphy offered an integrated way to understand letterforms. This was one of the many gifts from Edward Johnston, who reestablished the dominance of writing as the final arbiter in letter design. Classical letterforms reached a pinnacle in the Imperial Roman Capital 2000 years ago, and the history of Western writing is the evolution that followed. My study of pure calligraphic forms started there. In my case, drawing letters and then working with the brush gave me a deeper understanding and perspective early on, learning that writing was the matrix, or origin, of their forms. One has to be interested in the inner structure of letterforms, not just the



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## Typeface Design |

*“A love of letterforms is the beginning of typographical wisdom.” —John Biggs*

Letterforms in type start with calligraphy. This is exemplified historically by the fifteenth-century calligraphers whose letters were copied by the early printers and in our time by the likes of Hermann Zapf, Werner Schneider, Friedrich Poppl, Sumner Stone, Richard Lipton, Robert Slimbach, Julian Waters, and John Benson, to name just a few. Type design interested me even before I discovered calligraphy, and this seemed natural, given my keen interest in and sense of letterform design. I have studied the shapes of letters, from handwriting to typefaces, historical manuscripts to modern advertising. I studied the work of Frederic W. Goudy, William A. Dwiggins, Morris Fuller Benton, Jan Van Krimpen, Eric Gill, Adrian Frutiger, and of course, Hermann Zapf. I even read Daniel Berkeley Updike’s 1922 classic, *Printing Types*—both volumes.

In the early 1980s, I proposed several designs to the International Typeface Corporation (ITC) and was flatly rejected. A few other venues were tried, and then

I hung it up. From time to time, I would get offers to “convert” some of my script styles to fonts for use in headlines, but that was not what I was looking for (although it would have been smart from a financial perspective). Given the many hours one has to dedicate to creating a typeface, I was uncertain if there was money to be had in actually designing types. Discouraged, I thought, “Well, it is not meant to be.”

In the 1990s, things changed. Fontographer and FontLab, software for making digital type, made it possible for one to start a “typefoundry” right at home. Additionally, with the Internet, the whole world of typeface distribution changed; typefaces could be sold and downloaded from the web. Since I loved letters and was proficient drawing with vector tools, I believed I was more than halfway there, and from time to time I would work on type designs. But I never finished any, and finished work is what counts. A time commitment was needed that I could not afford on my own.



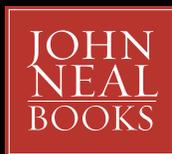


With this book, John Stevens takes you on a lively journey into the world of letters created with pen, brush, chisel, and pixel; his years of experience as a calligrapher, lettering artist, and designer have been put to words. A feast for the eyes, this book presents a master's work in both tradition and exploration.

John's vision as well as his command over tool, form, and design create the beauty in his work

and its depth and ingenuity. For him, letterforms are both a means of communication and a subject themselves. He plays and invents with letterforms freely but with the utmost respect for their historical underpinnings, creating works that are vibrant and original.

Beautiful to look at and wonderfully written, this is a book that all lovers of the lettering arts will want on their shelves.



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