

Cailie Golden

1922 Project

1922: year of the “Graphic Designer”

Proponents of Modernism often characterized their era as one of change. Long-held standards for the arts invited scrutiny followed by revision; technological advancement and the upheaval caused by two world wars led to an explosion of new “isms,” theories, and manifestos—each offering its own perspective. As short-form media, Modernist periodicals circulated these concepts with the speed and consistency that lengthier formats could not afford. Dialogues developed: magazines sustained playful arguments, reviewed artists and authors, or debated the merit of new visual and literary styles. In this period of redefinition, design conventions evolved to suite a burgeoning print culture. The year nineteen twenty-two warrants special attention, because it marks an attempt to gather aspects of literary production under one title: graphic design.

In nineteen twenty-two, William Allison Dwiggins coined the term “graphic designer” in his essay “New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design” (Doordan 29). The treatise cites technological progress as something to capitalize on; although Dwiggins did not subscribe to any singular movement, he saw a need to synthesize the old guard of ‘fine printing’ with novel techniques. Tension between those who saw automation as a decline in quality and those who saw in it a chance to innovate prevented neither Dwiggins, nor other designers, from combining past traditions with modern trends. Progress generated new typefaces, visual styles, and concepts like Bauhaus or Gestalt theory. Because all literary magazines of the nineteen-twenties held varying views on the future of design, their covers and layouts also differ.

Documenting this evolution into what we now consider conventional design is important. To that end, the more visual examples available, the better informed scholars on the Modernist era's design history will be. Digitization provides an opportunity to preserve periodicals beyond the life of the physical document. If a digital facsimile were made, access would improve as well. The study of a certain magazine would no longer be limited by its location or number of copies. Researchers would be able to apply digital humanities methods to their projects, gathering and compiling data. The paper trail—now digital—also allows for ease of comparison.

Physical copies do, however, maintain a unique draw as objects that we interact with in ways that the editors, typists, and publishers intended. Research methods that split according to format echo the tension between forms displayed by different Modernist magazines: the art of 'fine printing' was slow to accommodate styles born in the era of the modern industrial press, but when integrated, the two forms combined the best of tradition with novelty. Imagine the script typeface as an analog to the hands-on methods of the past; that would align the modern shift towards minimalism and function with serif or sans serif styles. To cut this string of comparisons short and summarize, the integration of new and old forms (whether that be of research or design) only leads to diversity. Regarding design—diversity of formats, styles, or visual languages expands convention and expands a designer's creative horizons. With research in mind—employing both digital and physical formats allows for a more well-rounded scholarly body.

Design and research both converge in this project. I have digitized a selection of magazine covers from issues published in nineteen twenty-two. Titles include *The Criterion*, Oxford's *Broom*, *The New Age*, and *The Measure*. Each periodical was designed for a target audience and was, therefore, composed to compliment the perspective put forward within its

pages. Editors marketed their magazines, presenting an identity or narrative authority that the reader could buy into. Everything—from tone and content to typography and layout—comes together to form a cultivated image. The cover is its first impression; because of this, all of the aforementioned design elements must signal what that magazine has to offer. What is unique? What draws a potential subscriber’s eye?

All four of our featured magazines appealed to the public as authorities on Modernist literature. *The Criterion* and *The New Age* are literary reviews. *The Measure* circulated monthly collections of poetry. *Broom* was meant to give unknown artists a platform (Loeb 6). Their success comes down to the unity of message and design. Having presented a compelling identity and maintained a level of consistency across issues, these magazines gathered enough of a following that they hold cultural significance. The four magazines—*The Criterion*, *Broom*, *The New Era*, and *The Measure*—offer a snapshot of visual trends developing in nineteen twenty-two.

First, *The Criterion*, headed by editor and author T.S. Eliot, puts itself forward as a critical review that establishes a literary standard. Worth noting is the fact that *The Criterion*’s first edition circulates in 1922. Its publication begins in the midst of the standards for literature, art, and design being negotiated. As covers go, that of *The Criterion* lacks ornamentation—barring its typographical elements. Consider the title. It establishes this magazine as more than a review: “criterion” connotes a literary standard. Spacing between its capitalized letters proves close, and tight kerning gathers the cherry-bright characters into one cohesive wordmark. Small caps echo the logotype’s style throughout. Serif typefaces are used throughout. A business-like drop cap leads into each article and excerpt. Words not only remain in focus, but also—due to an effective hierarchy—ensure an intuitive reading experience for their audience. Overall, *The*

Criterion telegraphs sophistication. Experimental graphics and type arrangement may be lacking; however, this magazine maintains its crisp brand identity, foregrounding the well-ordered text within to emphasize a literary focus. The magazine's intended role must have been well-communicated. George Orwell wrote about *The Criterion* to a friend, saying: "for pure snootiness it beats anything I have ever seen" (Orwell 197). Whether or not Eliot succeeded in establishing literary standards for the twenty-first century, his magazine's content and design work in tandem to convey a unified message.

While the *Criterion* attempts to exude stability and authority, *Broom* features unknown names, marketing novelty while playing with the rules of design. *Broom*'s April 1922 issue blurs the line between text and image. Its title hovers in the background above two human figures that have been broken down into geometric pieces. The bicolored composition layers black ovals, rectangles, and lines over orange characters and hybrid shapes. Despite shifting in and out of focus, "Broom" remains prominent. Its placement ensure that although a reader may have to parse the vertical text, "April," from a disjointed illustration and then make sense of the image, the periodical's name will be first to catch their eye. Blocky, angular characters distinguish the title from the serif typefaces that make up the copy. The 1920's were the decade in which the term "graphic design" was coined by W.A. Dwiggins: a significant period for experimentation (source). Modernist magazines are foremost in this movement; the medium of short-form writing and publication allows for more creative freedom. *The Oxford Broom* reflects this shift, its covers growing more and more dynamic as the decade progresses. To quote Harold Loeb, one of the founders: "Throughout, the unknown, path-breaking artist will have, when his material merits it, at least an equal chance with the artist of acknowledged reputation" (*Broom* 97). It stands to

reason that this magazine's design would reflect the editors' willingness to encounter something new.

The third cover belongs to a weekly magazine, *The New Age*. *The New Age* positions itself in the midst of progress; its name, contents, and design projects an authoritative image. A serif header spans the horizontal length of the page, leaving narrow margins. The lines and strokes that characterize a serif typeface elongate—outstretched, exaggerated. Although crowded, the small table of contents below the title remains legible due to copy editors' careful organization. Pillars of text are split by vertical lines, further emphasizing this format's similarity to that of a newspaper. Credibility (or if not credibility, regularity) accompanies such an association. Opinions, reviews, and observations found within *The New Age* are written like news segments that those who would wish to take part in the new era must read to remain current. Topics were not limited to the arts; politics, social theories, and psychology also made up much of the magazine's content. When announcing an endowment for its Modernist Journal Project in collaboration with the University of Tulsa, Brown University announced that "*The New Age* helped to shape Modernism in literature and the arts from 1907 to 1922" (Baum). Again, the date nineteen twenty-two is associated with Modernism's formative period.

Our final magazine focuses on one specific genre, that of poetry. In *The Measure: a Journal of Poetry*, medium dictates content and branding. The small relief print draws one's eye towards the middle of the page, then separates the title from a list of poets below. In the illustration, a human figure measures the swirling entity overhead with a compass. What the figure is measuring remains ambiguous. Could it be the earth, a wave, or smoke? The diagonal lines created by arms belonging to both body and compass create a series of intersections that center the image with even greater emphasis. A modernist interest in all things classical might be

the motivation behind the centerpiece; this atlas-like character takes on a task of monumental proportions (pun intended). *The Measure*, although different to *The Criterion* in design, communicates a similar goal: to take on the dimensions of modernist poetry.

Altogether, the four selected covers provide insight into dialogues on tradition and progress, design and content, novelty and stability that make nineteen twenty-two so significant as a year in history. By analyzing the relationship between a magazine's design and its purpose, we recognize the diversity of perspectives in Modernist print culture.

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