

Penguins are everywhere these days, showing up in film, television, and children’s books. Penguin Books, too, are everywhere – having become, it appears, the new design icons of British mid-20th-century publishing. The level of interest is made manifest by the publication of these two books devoted solely to the art direction of this legendary British firm. What other publisher can claim such interest in its art direction and design history?

Penguins have always been highly collectable, and the object of interest for publishers and bookmen almost from their creation. Affordable and distributed throughout the English-speaking world, and covering a wide range of subjects and topics, Penguin titles have become part of many a household bookshelf. There is hardly a reader of English who would not own at least one Penguin title or who would not be familiar with the format. The book covers have even been popular as posters and t-shirts. While the titles have always been collectable, the nostalgic interest in mid-century Modernism and the growing interest in the history and development of European book design following World War II, and in book history, have all made these recent publications possible. The two books reviewed here, one by Phil Baines and the other by Richard B. Doubleday, tell the history of Penguin books, but they do so in very different ways, and from a very different focus.

Phil Baines’s *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story, 1935-2005* is the more comprehensive of the two, focusing on 70 years of cover artistry. Baines’s purpose is to chart “the development of British [paperback] publishing, book-cover design and the role of artists and designers in creating and defining the Penguin look.” The book is a chronological journey through the firm’s graphic-design history beginning with the first iconic covers of 1935 designed by Edward Young.

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While the text describes these early covers rather unhelpfully as a “basic horizontal tripartite division” which includes the “penguin itself,” the accompanying images and illustrations more than compensate: they are the glory of the book. With over 500 colour images, the book is a visual delight, and a collector’s dream. The covers are referenced with page number, a simple feature that is effective and precise, allowing the reader to turn directly to the appropriate item rather than looking for a “figure.” With so many illustrations, and recognizing the lack of a sense of scale, the book was designed to accommodate and represent most Penguin formats in their actual size. Where images have been reduced, only two other image sizes have been used (46% and 30% reductions) to assist the reader with comparisons. Each image thereby relates one to the other and effectively represents the scale of each book. The book is designed by Penguin Press designer David Pearson, whose “Great Idea” series for Penguin won the Design Museum’s “Designer of the Year Award” in January 2005 – the year with which the book concludes. Throughout there is a superb balance of text and image, and the pacing is excellent.

One problematic feature is the presentation of footnotes and portraits of individual designers. The footnote numbers, and the notes themselves in the left and right margins, are printed in orange. While a clever reference to the famous Penguin covers, the text is weak and the images often appear to be washed out. Pity the reader with weak eyes.

Divided into five chapters that narrate in chronological order the history of production and their designers, there is, in addition, a good bibliography (although it is not comprehensive), followed by a list of sources. There is also a brief outline of the development of the Penguin logo, along with an index. The great surprise for the reader, who does not have a comprehensive collection, is how little one knows of the infinite variety of artistic approaches used by Penguin, the number of trends and changing fashions they both pioneered and slavishly followed, and the large number of successful designs they achieved. Thankfully the book is also generous in showing some very obvious failures. In spite of a few problems the text is excellent and provides a comprehensive introduction to this fascinating firm.

Richard Doubleday’s _Jan Tschichold, Designer: The Penguin Years_ focuses on the influence on British design of Tschichold’s brief years in England, from his arrival in March 1947 to his departure in December 1949. Although founder Allen Lane had successfully
branded Penguin books into an instantly recognizable product, it was in need of renewal after the War. Increasing competition from new paperback publishers and inconsistent production standards and shortages left the books looking tired and ordinary. “Composition rules and standards were virtually nonexistent,” Doubleday notes, and Lane “clearly understood the importance of design as an instrumental marketing tool in the current and continued success.” In a remarkable move in post-war Britain, Lane hired a German-born typographer, albeit one who had fled to Switzerland in 1933, whose reputation for exacting typographic and design skills was precisely what was needed by Penguin books.

Tschichold’s English sojourn had huge implications for the company. Once he had accepted the position, Tschichold began by examining its current titles and before his arrival sent “explanatory notes and criticisms” to the editorial and production staff. His first act was to establish “Composition Rules” to relay methodical instructions for everyone involved in the creation of each book, and to demand consistent adherence to his new design standards. He then set about reworking every feature of the book’s design. Doubleday outlines and illustrates in detail Tschichold’s work on many of the various Penguin series: King Penguin, the Penguin Classics, the Puffin Picture Books, etc. There are wonderful illustrations of his mockups of title pages, annotations, and instructions for the printers to demonstrate the care and detail that went into the book’s production. In the end Tschichold was the “first typographer to effectively supervise and design, on such a comprehensive spectrum, well over 500 mass-produced books for a publishing firm.”

Tschichold’s activities at Penguin were also far reaching. As the “first designer at Penguin to separate the profession of graphic designer from the production editor,” Doubleday observes, his “careful planning, precise control, and demanding instructions to the machine compositors and printers enabled superb craftsmanship and the highest quality of book production.” Tschichold’s composition rules were widely distributed amongst other firms, and they “had an enormous influence on the entire British printing industry.”

Doubleday begins his study with an introduction on “The Flowering of the Printed Book” that outlines the history of printing, no doubt aimed at the students of Boston University where he is an Assistant Professor. While interesting, it is unnecessary considering that the study is so focused on one designer’s three-year stay in Britain. Chapter one is a more appropriate starting place, as it
describes Tschichold's career in Europe, followed by a brief history of the Penguin firm, up to his arrival in England in 1946. The rest of the book describes and illustrates his work at Penguin, along with a summary of his legacy at the firm and for British publishing. Appendices reprinting Tschichold's letters and documents relating to Penguin, as well as a "select list of publications by Jan Tschichold," a resource bibliography, and an index, follow.

Compared with Baines's paperback book, Doubleday's book is certainly a more elegant production, based on the principles laid out by Tschichold. But both books have their charms: potential readers will have to base their decision on the very different claims of each. Baines's book is a survey of 70 years, and what he relates in a few paragraphs, Doubleday details in an entire book. If you want a comprehensive history of the company, then Baines's Penguin by Design is an excellent survey. If your focus is on Tschichold and European design, then Doubleday's Jan Tschichold, Designer would be better. Neither duplicates the other, and libraries, collectors, and book historians would profit from having both on their shelves.

RANDALL SPELLER

Art Gallery of Ontario


This little book (only 77 pages in length, excluding notes and bibliography) had its genesis in a paper written for a SHARP conference in 2000. Howsam tells us that she was part of an interdisciplinary panel discussing the academic positioning of book history; a comparative volume projected by the panel never got off the ground, and Howsam decided to set forth her own position here. As a historian, she acknowledges that the main question she asks of "the book" – how it might illuminate past cultures – is fundamentally different to those a literary scholar or a bibliographer would ask, but she stresses the adaptability of the discipline itself and its comfortable position in the middle of a triangle formed by the three traditional disciplines. The first two chapters of Old Books and New Histories, then, offer an overview of the various disciplinary approaches to the subject, including the thorny problem of what to call what it is we do,