

Hermann Zapf · Philip Metzger

# ORBIS TYPOGRAPHICUS

*A complete digital facsimile*

A PROJECT BY JOSHUA LANGMAN

[www.orbistypographicus.com](http://www.orbistypographicus.com)

## Introductory Essays

## Why a digital *Orbis*?

An introduction by JOSHUA LANGMAN

*Orbis Typographicus* (“The Typographic World”) is a set of twenty-nine 9 × 12 letterpress broadsides, designed by Hermann Zapf and printed by Philip Metzger of Crabgrass Press between 1970 and 1980. The broadsides feature quotations on art, science, nature, faith, and the human condition, from authors ancient and contemporary. The text includes poetry, prose, anagrams, and palindromes, in English, German, French, and Japanese. Typeset by hand by Philip Metzger, the set pays tribute to worthy “Thoughts, words and phrases on the Arts and Sciences” through Zapf’s unconventional and ingenious use of typography. *Orbis Typographicus* functions both as a work of literary wall art and as an elaborate type specimen, showcasing many of Zapf’s own faces, as well as those of his wife Gudrun Zapf von Hesse, and several others. The set includes a specially crafted Plexiglass frame, in which all the leaves may be stored and periodically shuffled so that a different leaf is visible at the front.

I first discovered *Orbis Typographicus* four years ago, when I was looking for a letterpress shop where I could typeset and print some invitations. I was introduced by a mutual friend, Dr. James Tyler, to Dr. Philip A. Metzger, who has inherited his father’s print shop and Crabgrass Press. Along with the printing equipment, he acquired proofs of *Orbis Typographicus*, which are left over from the edition of 99 that his father printed for Hermann Zapf between 1970 and 1980.

Upon first discovering these broadsides, I was struck by the visual ingenuity and captivating beauty of the set. The typography is remarkable for its expressive rendering of the various passages, for its entrancing playfulness, and also for the skill and cleverness it demanded of the printer.

As anyone who has ever set type can attest, some of Zapf’s layouts are bafflingly tricky. For instance, the verses from the Rubaiyat, printed diagonally so that the strokes of the italic are vertical, must surely puzzle any printer who looks at them — Were the lines actually locked up diagonally? Was the text printed horizontally and the paper trimmed on a slant? (As it turns out, the type actually was set diagonally, most likely with specially cut triangular furniture.)

Of course, *Orbis Typographicus* is beautiful even to anyone who has never held a composing stick. Hermann Zapf’s imaginative typography makes the captivating words of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and da Vinci even more compelling. *Orbis Typographicus* gives to beautiful words the beautiful form they deserve.

While trying to describe *Orbis Typographicus* to a friend, I looked it up online, only to find that there was virtually no mention of it on the internet, let alone any images. Books proved to be not much help either in this regard. One can find a leaf or two reproduced here or there, but the complete set had never been republished in any medium. It seemed unfortunate that such an ingeniously beautiful work of art was so undeservedly obscure. Surely many designers, printers, typographers, and historians — not to mention general lovers of art and literature — would be interested in *Orbis Typographicus*, and it could only benefit the typographic community to make it more widely available.

I therefore wrote to Professor Zapf and secured his kind permission to republish the entirety of *Orbis* in digital form. The scans are taken from the copy in Philip A. Metzger’s collection (#15).

Though it can never capture the tactile beauty of the original, a digital reproduction provides two benefits: First, putting *Orbis Typographicus* online makes it accessible to people who can’t easily get their hands on a physical copy — i.e., nearly everyone. Second, this facsimile includes a computer-searchable transcript to make it easy to find a specific page based on a search term. In addition to the web-quality images, I have also made the original 1200 dpi scans available for download for personal study and enjoyment. Philip A. Metzger, son of Philip (L.) Metzger of Crabgrass Press, has also written some reminiscences specifically for this web site.

I am very pleased to provide a home on the internet for this unique work of art. (If you should happen to be inspired to seek out a real copy of *Orbis*, a WorldCat search is a good place to start.) Let me know if you have any comments or questions, and enjoy *Orbis Typographicus*.

J.L.

Allentown, PA · 2013

## Philip L. Metzger and the Crabgrass Press

*Reminiscences by his son, PHILIP A. METZGER*

My father was born in Chicago in 1914, the youngest of three sons of a butcher. Both parents had emigrated from Germany around 1900, and the father, George, maintained a butcher shop on Northwest Ave. in Chicago, where the family lived above the store. As far as I am aware, education beyond a trade was not something that was emphasized in the family. My father's older brothers John and George did not attend college. However, as my father used to recount, a high school teacher stimulated in him an interest in further education; he graduated from the University of Chicago with a B.A. in history, and an M.A.T., to prepare him for a high school teaching career. World War II intervened, however, and my father was drafted into the army in his late twenties. With a college degree in hand, he soon found himself in Officer Candidate School, and after that an assignment to army personnel. He spent some of his army time working in personnel on Guam. His army experience developed his interest in personnel work, and after a few years working in this field in Chicago, he was hired in 1951 by the Kansas City Power and Light Co. as a middle manager. He retired from KCPL at age 55 as Vice President of Personnel. During the war, he married my mother Louise, also born in 1914 and a high school classmate, although their relationship did not develop until after graduation. They had two children, my younger brother Joel and me.

None of this explains my father's subsequent interest in the craft of hand printing; my father attributed this to an uncle Leonard (his middle initial L), who was a bookbinder. At any rate, by 1957 he must have felt secure enough in his life and career to pursue his dream of learning to print. That year a Chandler & Price treadle-operated platen press and a few cases of type — mostly of the Caslon-derivative sort — showed up in our basement. Over the next years, he and his sons developed their skills without the help of outside instruction. Although the press, which was given the name "Crabgrass Press," was not intended as a commercial enterprise, it did not hurt that there was a steady local market for job printing of all types, which helped to provide money to expand the shop, and give my brother and me some cash in our pockets. One of the money-making opportunities came from the plethora of swim and country clubs in the suburb of Kansas City called Prairie Village where we lived. They all had swim meets throughout the summer and they all needed award ribbons, sometimes to sixth or seventh place. Over the years we went through a lot of rolls of colored ribbon and cans of gold ink supplying this demand.

An explanation for the press's rather eccentric name is in order. According to my father, the name came from the fact that the lawn was thoroughly neglected as a result of his printing activities — although since there was never anyone less interested in puttering in the lawn than my father, printing activity would not at all have been necessary to achieve this end. At one time he suggested that the press's commercial motto should be "If you crab about our product you can go to grass," but this was never implemented.

I should interject here that in the 1950s and 1960s, letterpress printing was still a viable commercial enterprise. Type and associated equipment for hand setting were readily available new, or used when shops went out of business or converted to offset. This was true also of European type, and my father began to develop what I expect was the most extensive collection of European and American display faces anywhere. As may be gathered, my father enjoyed acquiring the best typefaces from founders around the world, in addition to using them to print. From the used Caslon, the Crabgrass Press gradually moved to Bulmer, and then under Zapf's influence, to full sets of Palatino, Optima, and also a beautiful face designed by Zapf's wife Gudrun, Diotima. Display faces came from such foundries as Enschedé, Fournier, Stempel, Bauer, and Nebiolo.

So it went for a number of years. My father's connection to typographer Hermann Zapf came about after I left for college in 1962, so I was not present to see most of what I will report, but for the initial stages I was still at home. Hallmark Cards is a Kansas City company, and employed graphic designers for some of its products. One of these was Harald Peter, who had been a student of Zapf's. I do not know the specifics of how my father met Peter, and how this connected to Zapf, but the process, based on mutual interest, is easy to imagine. At any rate, Zapf and my father became close friends, and visited between Germany and the United States regularly.

Now, to turn to *Orbis Typographicus* and its genesis. I was not party to the discussions between Zapf and my father on this subject, but I can imagine the project suited both parties to a tee. Zapf is one of the great typographers of this age or any other. A man of unbounded imagination and possessor of a typographic eye keen beyond comprehension, he must have felt the limitations of commercial work. The chance to design the pages of *Orbis* allowed him to expand his vision as far as it could go. At the same time, the challenge of bringing the products of Zapf's imagination to fruition must have been a joy to my father, of the sort few people are rewarded with

in life. Not that the task was always easy. My father used to grumble sometimes about how long it took for proofs to come back from Germany. He would also sometimes comment on the technical challenges of realizing Zapf's designs in handset type on a hand operated press. Anyone with any knowledge of letterpress printing will recognize these challenges as they present themselves on the sheets of *Orbis*. I should emphasize that all the type used in *Orbis* was in my father's shop. In fact, Zapf had agreed to use only what my father owned.

Let me report one anecdote that I remember vividly. Zapf had sent back a proof on which he asked for a line of type to be moved to the right or left by half a point. A point is a typographic measurement that equals about  $1/72$  of an inch, so half of that is not much at all, somewhere around .007 of an inch. After feeling some incredulity, my father moved the line by that amount, and had to admit that it did result in an improvement.

After the completion of *Orbis Typographicus*, there was discussion of a further collaboration, but my father died rather suddenly of a heart attack in the fall of 1981.

Perhaps it's just as well that they never attempted a sequel. *Orbis Typographicus* is a very personal creation, and it's hard to imagine how it could have been surpassed. It seems to have given Zapf a chance to explore typography far beyond the presentation of text. Indeed, the texts, some of Zapf's favorite quotations, were really only excuses to create sometimes rather abstract graphic images. For my father, it was certainly the culmination of the development of his skill as a printer. One might say that *Orbis Typographicus* represents a pinnacle in the combination of art and craft.

P.M.

Bethlehem, PA · 2013